カバーイラスト／加藤勇樹（アークシステムワークス）
カバーデザイン／宮脇高志

ドラゴンブック
ふ-1
1-1

BLAZBLUE―ブレイブルー―
フェイズ0

原案・監修：モリトシミチ
著：駒尾真子

富士見書房

9784829145920

ISBN978-4-8291-4592-0
C0176 ¥640E

定価：本体640円（税別）

1920176006400

魔道書「蒼（ブレイブルー）」の力と、「死神」の異名を持つ男・ラグナ＝ザ＝ブラッドエッジ。だが、見知らぬ地で目を覚ました彼は、「蒼」の力と記憶を失っていた。

未知の世界で出会った「治癒」の魔法を使う少女セリカや獣人の戦士ミツヨシらとの旅路は、人類を破滅に導く「黒き獣」へと繋（つな）がっていくのだが――。

人気格闘ゲーム「ＢＬＡＺＢＬＵＥ」シリーズで謎（なぞ）に包まれていた歴史が明らかとなり、すべての始まり（フェイズ0）へと続く完全公式ストーリー、ここに見参！

DRAGON BOOK
ドラゴンブック

◉ROBOTICS;NOTES―ロボティクス・ノーツ―①

◉STEINS;GATE―シュタインズ・ゲート―
円環連鎖のウロボロス①～②
比翼連理のアンダーリン①～③

◉BLAZBLUE―ブレイブルー―
フェイズ0
フェイズシフト1～4

◉英雄伝説 零の軌跡
①金の太陽、銀の月

◉GOD EATER
～アリサ・イン・アンダーワールド～
～ノッキン・オン・ヘブンズドア～

◉キャサリン

◉コープスパーティー
Book of Shadows

◉モンスター・コレクション・サモナーズ
アルフレアの不死鳥
ソラステルの堕天使

BLAZBLUE

PHASE 0

《フェイズゼロ》

「どこか痛いところある？
気分は悪くない？」

「いや、特には。……
つーかお前誰だ？それと、俺は
なんだってこんなとこで寝てんだ？」

「第六六六拘束機関解放！」

「次元干渉虚数方陣展開！」

言葉に応じて、ラグナの腕に
無数の赤い筋が走る。

「問答、無用

ごうと音がして、
魔女の手の中で、
火炎が燃え盛る。

Prologue

The Gate. That was what he called it.

In a man-made, unnatural room, green and red lights were flickering. Two men were fixing their gazes to numerous lined up gauges.

One was in his early forties. He wore a white gown. At a glance, his appearance would look like that of a scientist. However, any effort to keep a cool composure still couldn't hide his nervousness. Frequently combing his hair and pushing up his glasses didn't help, either.

One was a little younger. He was in his late twenties. He didn't give a single speck of what he was thinking or anything resembling emotions. His eyes were locked on the gauge's reading.

"On the Azure Grimoire, the Prime Field Device Type Zero, Murakumo Unit..."

The man with glasses, who was watching the gauges, lifted his face. His eyes were sharply narrowing at the sight that had spread before him.

There, a particular glass panel had been installed to one of the walls. On the other side of the glass, something was clearly visible.

What could be seen was something that looked like the crater of a volcano. Thick red liquid was burning furiously. It was squirming within the hole of the solid rock surface.

It could also be seen as the pulse of an unreasonable creature.

"This definitely falls to an unconventional category... But having come this far, it feels like any common sense would be meaningless, yes?"

The voice was directed to the expressionless young man by his side. But the young man didn't even glance to where the voice was coming from. The side of his face looked like it had been hardened with wax. Within it, only his cold, apathetic lips moved slightly.

"... The Kusanagi is..."

"What's wrong, Relius? To completely purify Kusanagi, a little bit more time is necessary, but..."

The gentleman with glasses had begun speaking, but he was interrupted. The wax-faced man called Relius, who had been sitting the entire time, suddenly rose up from his chair. Then he hurriedly went out of the room.

The man with glasses who had been left behind also hurriedly chased after him.

They went inside an elevator from the corridor and finally descended to some place. They were in front of the object that looked like a giant crater, which could be seen across the special glass panel from before.

The two men who had been running around were standing around the vicinity of the crater.

"Relius! You were the one who said not to do any unnecessary intervention to the "Gate", weren't you!?"

Rushing up, the man flinched from the overwhelming heat. The man with glasses raised his voice to compensate for it.

Whether because of the might of the whirling flames, or perhaps because he had no intention to turn his face from the beginning, the other man stared down the gigantic cauldron-like object.

"What's the meaning of this...? There is no response from Kusanagi. There is something from deeper within...."

"Hey! What's going on, Relius Clover!?"

"This is... I see. The opposite side of the Boundary—"

Suddenly, black mist gushed out from the crater.

Its violent force swallowed Relius' words, then instantly engulfed him entirely.

"Wha...!?"

Something was happening.

The black mist spread endlessly in front of the wide-eyed and shocked man with glasses. The force was drastically growing greater and the heat increased the pressure of the atmosphere.

Relius was nowhere to be seen. Any trace of him being swallowed had also vanished.

"Uh... Ah, ah..."

Something was happening.

It was beyond the man's comprehension.

A phenomenon no one had witnessed before was swirling about. It was stretching and squirming, as if taking some sort of a form.

Slowly, something had appeared, raising its crooked neck upward... it was somewhat similar to a snake.

Before long, the enormous body had reached its critical limit and began trembling. It burst and flew out in an instant.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH—!"

Even the man's scream was swallowed. The mist demon, roaring and causing tremors, was spurting out, and then it surged as vigorously as ever.

Trampling all kinds of logic, it kept growing higher and higher.

Thus, there were almost no remains left.

Only the eroded wall ruins of the measurement room and an unnaturally silent cauldron were left behind.

The silver full moon hung on the sky.

It was a place that was connected to everywhere, yet could be reached from nowhere.

It was a place where everything looked like illusions drifting about.

Thick ivy covered the entire sides of the old castle's walls. Within one of its room, there was an aging white haired man sitting alone. His body sunk deep within his profound seat.

With his youthful but wise eyes, which matched his piling age, he stared at the water's surface, similar to a mirror from a stretched silver tray.

All that was occurring in the world was projected there.

...As well as dismays and sorrows.

"Clavis-sama."

A voice was raised behind the aged man. It was the voice of a man with deep composure.

Without turning his head, the aged man glanced to where the voice came from. He answered while lightly molding his hand to support his cheeks.

"Valkenhayn, isn't it? ...I assume you bring bad news."

"In accordance with the international summit meeting held not too long ago, the resolution to launch a nuclear strike on Japan has been confirmed. Judging by the current circumstances, I fear it will be carried soon enough."

"I see..."

The aged man's eyes were clouded with grief before dropping down their sight at the reflective water surface.

"It can no longer be avoided, then. If that was their decision, then there is nothing we can do... I am but only a mere observer."

What sort of outcome would their decision make? A better future? Or complete destruction?

The constant questions within the aged man's mind grew silent, as well as the projections of all of the world's incidents on the reflective water.

Without warning, black mist gushed out from within the earth. It took the form of a gigantic serpent with numerous heads. Mankind called that mist demon, which appeared so suddenly, the "Black Beast".

The Black Beast's only instinct was to destroy.

Anything and everything, it destroyed entirely.

The elusive beast could not be matched by anyone's powers, nor could it be hurt by any kind of strength. In the end, humanity decided to destroy the land where the Black Beast appeared.

It was surely the very last measure that could be taken.

However... the being didn't die.

The Black Beast leaped from the scorched earth and spread all over the world.

Chapter 1: Lost White

———Log 1

The collaborative research with him went favorably so far.

His knowledge and skills proved to be greatly useful to my personal research task. I'm looking forward to the development from here on after.

Relius Clover. He is truly a genius.

———Log 2

Today, an unusual visitor came. He was a suspicious man who had green hair and snake-like smile.

He seemed to be really interested in our research, to the point that he requested us to develop a particular prime field device.

It obviously should be refused, but Relius consented of his own accord. Relius had always been that kind of a guy. Always deciding something only by his own, disregarding everyone else's.

Despite that, we never expected to be actually doing that mysterious man's pipe dream.

However, according to that man's words, we might have the chance to come in contact with the Original Unit. If that is what would be happening, then I would consider it as a sufficient payoff.

That man certainly had the knowledge in the areas we were lacking in. It didn't take long for Relius to cooperate with him on a whim.

The suffocating stench of greenery could be smelled.

Then, dazzling light shone down on the opposite direction.

But he could only grasp that much. Everything else was vague. He felt like he was dreaming.

Where is this place? Who am I? What am I doing? Am I alive? Did I die? Do I even exist?

Not understanding anything, he felt like perhaps he was sitting on a grass.

"...kay?"

Suddenly, someone's voice could be heard.

Was that person facing in this direction? The dazzling light from before started receding.

"A... you... kay?"

It was a female's voice. The voice was pure and flowing clearly. His dazed mind was calming down because of that clear voice.

He was thinking for a reply, but his strength left his body. His voice wouldn't come out.

He was at his limit. He could not remain conscious.

Suddenly, his body shook and felt like it was falling down. At the same time, the world around him became shrouded by darkness.

On the brink of losing consciousness, the female's voice panicked, muttered something. Immediately, he could not hear anything anymore.

When his eye opened, he could see cracks on the wooden ceiling.

"...Where is this place?

A crude futon had been spread out to serve as a crude bed. Lying down on top of it was a figure of a white haired young man, frowning.

It was an unfamiliar scenery. His green eye was moving around to look at the surroundings. The bed was neatly tucked in. He seemed to be in a nearly collapsed

simple cabin. There were very few household items; an almost broken chair and cracked tableware. The surrounding was just like that.

Just as expected, he did not recognize this place.

"What happened...?"

He could not think clearly as his head was still dazed. Just as he was about to get up, he heard a small sound from behind.

"Ah, you're finally awake. I'm glad."

Simultaneously, a female's voice could be heard. The young man turned around.

It was a girl with tied up gentle brown hair and a slender figure. She was getting inside the cabin.

The girl looked at the young man and made a delightful expression as she rushed to his side. She casually took the young man's left hand and put her fingers on his wrist as she easily took his pulse.

"Does it hurt somewhere? Do you feel anything bad?"

"Not really. ...By the way, who the heck are you? How come I'm lying here?"

Not understanding the situation at all, the young man stared at the girl. She seemed to be in her teens. Her white skin was without any suntan and she had a refined look.

It was very unlikely for her to live in such worn-out cabin like this.

"That's right. I've yet to introduce myself. I'm Celica A. Mercury."

The girl named Celica carelessly replied while displaying a friendly smile.

This ruined cabin became even more unsuitable for her.

"Onii-san's name is?"

"Oh yeah, my name is..."

It was such an easy question and he was about to answer it, but the young man was at loss for words.

Name. His own name. Somehow, it wasn't coming out.

It's not like he never had one. It's just that his head was in such a mess. When he tried to recall it, he felt like there was something like white haze trying to swallow his consciousness.

"...It's Ragna."

Strongly pressing his scowling head to his left hand, the white haired young man called Ragna was able to get his name from within his confused mind.

It didn't feel wrong when he spoke of it. Surely this meant that it was indeed his name.

"Ragna-san, then. I under..."

"Wait, wait. Just Ragna is fine. If you put 'san' to it, it just doesn't feel right."

"Fufu, okay. Nice to meet you, Ragna."

Seeing Ragna roughly messing with his unkempt hair, Celica let out an amused laugh.

Ragna then made an awkward look on his face. After that, he once again looked around between Celica and the cabin.

Since his body felt so heavy, moving became really troublesome.

"Hey, Celica. I totally don't have any idea how I got into this situation. Only thing I get is that I somehow slept in this beat-down house. Tell me the details of what happened."

"Ah, that's true. Well then, let me keep it short."

Celica frankly nodded and then moved to sit on the edge of Ragna's bed to face him. Her large, doll-like eyes looked straight at Ragna without hesitating.

"Ragna, you had collapsed at the entrance of the forest located behind this village... or perhaps I should say you lied down. You had injuries all over your body, and your unstable consciousness was also very faint, so I borrowed this cabin's bed for you to rest in."

"Did you carry me all the way here?"

"That's impossible! Ragna, you had almost no consciousness left, but you managed to walk here on your own. Of course, I lent you my shoulders to support you, too."

While saying “you were really heavy!” and laughing, Celica turned her tiny shoulders around and around.

She was a girl with a cheerful smile. A strange laughter which wouldn't make anyone upset. Instead of just a plain laughter, it gave off such gentle warmth, just like being in the middle of a place where the sun was shining down softly.

(...This kind of smile... I've seen it somewhere before.)

Still feeling the thick haziness within his mind, Ragna's faint memories were asserting themselves like they were being stirred. But whose smile was that? Where did he see it? Whether those were truly his memories or not... he had no confidence in them.

"Then I treated Ragna's injuries. After that, I cleaned your dirty face and clothes, too. Just as I got back from washing the towel, you awakened."

"You keep saying I had wounds. Why can't I see any here?"

Ragna then looked down upon his own body.

Black clothes and a long red jacket. The holes on them were patched and remains of dirt could still be seen. However, there was no trace of any scar left by the treatment.

Celica seemed to be a little troubled as her eyebrows furrowed, and she started to scratch a cheek with her fingertip.

"Ah, about that. How should I put it...?"

"Just tell me already."

"...The thing is, I healed Ragna's wounds by using magic... I would say, but would you believe me?"

Her huge eyes stared at Ragna intensely as if examining him. A slight bit of uneasiness had spread on her smiling face.

Realizing it, Ragna wondered slightly.

"Oh. So you're a magician. And a healing magic user on top of it. First time I actually saw one."

"Eh?"

This time, it was Celica's turn to wonder around. Blinking with surprise, she slightly leaned her small body forward.

"That talk about magic, do you really believe me?"

"Huh? Even if I don't wanna believe it, it's not like it's a weird thing to be actually true."

Magic was a special kind of skill that had existed a long time ago. To able to handle it was largely determined by the qualities of a person. Because of it, there weren't many of its users, but the existence and term of magic was supposedly known by most people.

At the very least, it was common sense according to what Ragna remembered.

(Hm? But where have I seen magic used before?)

He was sure that he had seen someone use it before, but yet again it was buried by the white haze within his mind as he tried to remember.

In front of him, Celica looked dumbfounded as she fixed her gaze at Ragna.

"Ragna... You're surely a weird person."

"The hell was that?"

"After all, any ordinary person would say that magic is very unscientific and then simply dismiss its existence."

Ragna tilted his head, as if puzzled. If he was not to believe any of her words, it would be that one. But Celica explained it in a serious manner of speaking. It was unlikely for her to be joking.

It was a weird feeling. It was as if the world had suddenly changed after he awakened from sleep.

While Ragna was still confused, Celica had already come to her own conclusion. It was shown by the same attractive cheerful face from the beginning that had blossomed. She then raised her lean figure back up.

"But I'm glad. Now I don't have to explain about magic and all of its details anymore."

"Seems so."

Ragna let out a bitter smile. His expression changed bit by bit.

"Ah... but still."

Suddenly, a sad look appeared within Celica's eyes. Her small hands slowly and gently touched Ragna's right arm.

"No matter what, I can't heal your right arm and right eye back to normal..."

"Seems like it."

Snapped out, Ragna had noticed something ever since Celica entered the room.

Thanks to Celica's healing magic, there wasn't any single scratch left on his body.

However, his right arm and right eye were not the same case. They were in their usual shape, but it felt like there wasn't any existence in them, and neither could they be moved.

He could only twitch the arm's fingertips. The eye had lost its ability to perceive light.

"I don't mean to pry, but what exactly happened?"

Slightly leaning her head, Celica glanced at Ragna while he felt his right arm.

Ragna started to remove the glove which covered his right hand. The hand that appeared looked similar to a solidified shadow. It was dyed pitch black, and there were claws on the end of it.

Stroking it, he knew that it was human skin, but there wasn't any sensation whatsoever when it was touched.

It was as if a totally different person's arm had been attached to him.

"...I can't remember why."

"You mean the reason why your arm is like that?"

"Nope. Not just that."

Ragna sighed. It was about time he finally admitted it no matter what. He was well aware that his arm and eye were not like the others.

"How did I get here? Where did I come from? To begin with, what kind of person I am...?"

As he talked, his voice seemed to be more distant. He had a bad feeling about his questions.

"Except my name, I can't remember anything else."

A brief pause. It seemed Celica had finally understood what Ragna was trying to convey. Her eyes slowly but surely widened an impressive extent in response.

Memory loss. It sure was easy to speak of, but it's not as if Ragna forgot everything.

For example, the world had air, water, and soil. This kind of knowledge was implanted within his brain. He had already understood any common sense that didn't require any thinking process.

The memories he had lost were mainly anything that concerned his own background. He barely remembered his name, but he forgot who had given him that name. Did he have parents? How about siblings? Where was he born? Where had he been raised? What were his friends' names?

He knew this information existed within his brain, but he couldn't find them. Consequently, he couldn't guess the reason why he collapsed near a deserted village.

"...Hey, hear me for a bit, will ya?"

The sun had steadily leaned westward. It was already noon. Ragna and Celica were walking through the rough path of a mountain which seemed to be unexploited by human hands.

Celica turned out to not have any relation with the abandoned village. She was there by chance when she was en route to her destination. Discovering Ragna was a coincidence.

Her destination was a port city not too far from here. Unlike the abandoned village within the mountain, the port city had many people living there. Ships and buses always traveled around to various places. It seemed she was about to board a ship there to continue her journey to search for her father.

It was possible to obtain information regarding memory loss there. In any case, it was better than just staying at that abandoned village. For that very reason, Ragna decided to accompany Celica.

Along the way, Ragna took a step ahead and spoke with a heavy tone while looking at Celica.

"This might be my imagination, okay?"

"Mm, what is it?"

Celica answered while looking straight ahead. Her tied-up long hair swayed around while she walked.

Although he was distracted by it, Ragna talked with a grimaced look.

"...Aren't we back on the same road?"

The port city was on the bottom of the mountain. But the road they were taking continued to be steadily ascending. The inclination felt just the same as when they were getting out from the abandoned village. Celica turned to Ragna and smiled.

"It's just your feeling. That can't happen. You worry too much, Ragna."

"Yeah, if only that was the case. Then am I seeing that wrong?"

As he said that, Ragna pointed at the object he was looking at.

The thin path hadn't been explored by many people. To even see traces on the road might have been a stroke of luck.

On the sloppy road from before, bit by bit, houses could be seen lining up.

Residences.

But there wasn't any sight of people.

Of course, it's because that was the abandoned village.

"...Eh?"

Her eyes followed Ragna's finger. There was a brief pause. With an innocent voice, Celica leaned her head, looking puzzled.

"Don't gimme that 'eh'! Are you an idiot!? We actually circled back here!"

"No way... This is strange. It was a straight road."

"The heck does it lead?! You're the one brimming with confidence when you said we should cut through the forest!"

"Oh dear, was that right?"

"Yes, it was! Wait, don't you have any idea that we're currently lost!?"

Celica frequently ensured Ragna when she unhesitatingly went on trackless paths. Her confidence on moving forward never wavered even once. That's why Ragna kept burying his emerging uneasiness deep within. Until now.

"But if we're to climb down the mountain, shouldn't we just keep going downward?"

If that was the case, how did they go back there again?

Ragna wondered while holding his head by his still functional left hand.

"You have a map?"

"I got one."

Celica grabbed a map from her dangled bag and spread it. It was a world map.

"Let's see. If we're heading to the town, then I think we're probably here."

Her white finger pointed at an area near a town around seashore. The actual distance, however, was quite hard to imagine.

Even then, she said things like "I think" and "probably" when pointing at the world map. It pretty much made her credibility nonexistent.

Ragna had finally understood. He always had been suspicious of her.

Why would a person go through a deserted village located in a mountain? How he collapsed in that place was one thing, but why would a girl like Celica end up in that place, too?

The questions weren't that important anymore. He felt it as if it was natural.

"Celica."

Ragna put his hand on her shoulder.

"You don't have any sense of direction at all, do you?"

"Eh? That can't be true."

"It's TRUE!"

Hearing the girl's confused reply, Ragna instinctively raised his voice.

"I'm not gonna say anything bad, but you have to realize it yourself. It's because of this disaster that we're so slow. From now own, when you're wandering alone, we got to have a counter measure..."

Raising the corner of his eye, Ragna began to preach at Celica. Suddenly, Ragna stopped mid-sentence. He sensed ominous presences.

Influenced by his hunch, Ragna grabbed a large sword which had been hung on his waist.

It was a peculiar sword with a broad blade. Ragna couldn't recall how he obtained it.

"Eh? W-What's wrong?"

"Just get behind me for now."

Guarding the confused Celica behind his back, Ragna directed the bulky tip of his sword toward their surroundings.

As if awaiting them, black silhouettes jumped out from within the surrounding forest near the abandoned village.

"What the heck are these things...?"

Ragna was bewildered by the figures.

What had jumped out were four-legged beasts. Their heads were at Ragna's knee level. There were six of them, their fangs resembling that of dog. However, it was unusual for wild dogs to group up like this.

They discharged muddy drool which resembled pus as they slowly closed the distance. Rather than dog, their obviously grotesque appearances were more similar to hellhounds straight from a nightmare.

Their needle-like fur seemed as if it was stained by black soot.

"This is caused by the Black Beast."

Celica said that while frowning behind the cover of Ragna's back.

"Black Beast?"

"A monster resembling a massive amount of shadow. Six years ago, it appeared all of a sudden in Japan and destroyed everything indiscriminately. Any wildlife that has received its influence will immediately become ferocious and attack humans."

"Impossible...!"

As he was replying, Ragna got interrupted and couldn't finish his sentence. The six beasts, which had been lowering their stance, simultaneously leaped at them.

"Shit! You're annoying!"

Protecting Celica, Ragna drew a half-circle with his sword to shake off the beasts.

Although the head couldn't remember how to handle the sword, the body clearly did. His body was moving faster than his thinking process.

The dull sensation meant he had sliced one of beast's abdomen. But the slashing speed mismatched what he had remembered.

His arm felt heavy. He had fortunately grown accustomed to handling the sword by only his left arm, but the fact that he couldn't move anything above his right elbow was extremely inconvenient. His body balance felt amiss.

Moreover, because he couldn't see anything on his right side anymore, it was hindering his movement.

Ragna roughly kicked the body of a wild dog that had been aiming for his feet.

As if its throat was torn, it let out an eerie shriek. Along with it, black powder and saliva scattered around.

"Scram!!"

The poor balance of his body made any lightweight technique insufficient. With all his might, he swung his sword in succession to repel attacks using the front frames, and then used the back of his sword to smash the skull of the beast that had leaped.

The bone hadn't even been crushed, but the beast fainted and collapsed to the ground. Four left.

Ragna took the chance to thrust the tip of his sword when the beasts were howling to each other, using its bulky side to hit one of them on the nose.

Instead of feeding it meat, Ragna gagged another beast with the sword's blade. He proceeded to bash the beast as if he was swinging a hammer.

Another one had leaped, but Ragna used the momentum to slam it down using his feet before doing a straight slash intended to kill it. The last beast had jumped with its fangs bared. He avoided it and used his body weight to strike the beast's spine.

"Guh, haah... hah..."

Before long, the six beastly figures had laid weak on the dry ground.

Still, Ragna's breathing had become disordered. Faint tongue clicking could be heard as he looked at his right arm. If the arm could at least move, he would be more at ease when fighting. Since his arm was completely restrained, he had to be exceptionally careful.

"Those things...caused by the Black Beast?"

Ragna pierced the ground with the massive sword. As he leaned his unbalanced body to the sword, Ragna groaned. The right half of his body became excessively heavy.

"And it appeared six years ago? Don't give me that joke."

"What do you mean?"

From behind Ragna, who had stabilized his breathing, Celica slowly appeared while frowning and looking puzzled.

Ragna roughly pondered in his mind. As if something big had clung on, his mind gave off a bad feeling.

"What, did I say something weird? The Black Beast's appearance is a hundred year old fairy tale, right? And what's with Japan? Wasn't Japan the utterly destroyed country from a long time ago?"

"What do you mean by long time ago? Sure, Japan had ceased to be a country, but both the Black Beast's attack and nuclear strike happened six years ago, you know?"

"That can't be..."

Ragna's words stopped midway.

Celica was looking at him with a confused look. She didn't seem to be kidding. Rather, surely this girl wouldn't pull a stunt to tell lies and deceive him, right?

Despite that, Ragna's faint memories kept shouting in denial, as if clawing around his mind. He couldn't comprehend what she had said as truth or not.

"Hey! The hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Eh?"

Cutting off his thought, Ragna raised his voice at Celica. She once again looked puzzled as she turned to face him.

Before Ragna noticed it, Celica had approached one of the defeated wild dogs and knelt beside it.

"Get away! Those things are still..."

"It's okay."

I still haven't finished them off yet. That was what Ragna was about to say before Celica replied softly.

Celica held her white hands over the defeated and helpless wild dog. The hands were slightly enveloped with a warm-looking light. She gently brushed the dog's fur and the black soot filth was dissolved.

What had happened was obvious. His first time seeing it. Healing magic.

He was about to stop her, but after seeing Celica's expression when she watched the dog, Ragna froze. It was a very affectionate face. It was breathtaking.

"...It's all right now. Please return to your home."

That whisper felt nostalgic. Ragna suddenly got minor dizziness as he thought that.

The wild dog got up, letting out a pitiful whimper.

Reflexively, Ragna put himself on guard, but the awakened wild dog had lost the ferociousness from before.

Instead, it looked startled and ran to the forest after seeing its collapsed comrades.

One by one, Celica cured the other wild dogs. While she was doing so, Ragna watched her, anticipating for any attack the whole time.

Soon, the defeated wild dogs had all gone to the forest. Celica stood up and brushed off the dirt on her knees. Ragna then let out a big sigh of amazement.

"Hey, you. That stunt you did just now, do you always do that?"

There was no more danger lingering about. Ragna put the sword back to his waist and scratched his head.

Celica crossed her arms behind like a kid and let out a wry smile.

"It's not good?"

"It's obviously not, you idiot! What are you gonna do if they attack again? Don't do things without knowing the consequences!"

"But I can't just leave them."

Looking straight at the lecturing Ragna, Celica showed no sign of regret. She answered clearly with no hesitation.

Since he actually said a sound argument, Ragna seemed to be astonished upon hearing her reply.

"What are you babbling about? Being kind is one thing, but you can't go being soft-hearted to everything."

"Aha... thanks. I already heard that from various people. But I can't do it. Once I see them like that, I can't just avert my eyes from them."

Celica looked up at Ragna, smiling and narrowing her eyes as if crying.

"I knew that I was being naïve. However, I often see something hurt before my eyes and I have the power to heal them. If I don't use it, they may die. If I use it, they can live for at least a little more."

"You're hopeless."

As if cut by Celica's words, Ragna shook his head while looking dumbfounded.

Celica bashfully tilted her head.

"Besides, Ragna would save me if I were attacked, right?"

"Idiot."

"Eh? What's with that?! Why did you call me idiot? Speaking of, you've called me idiot before, too!"

"Finally realized it, huh? You're a hopeless idiot."

While saying that, Ragna was actually surprised. What Celica said probably was true to him.

Even when he didn't know who and where he came from, perhaps as Celica had said he would save her if she were in danger.

If he saw someone being attacked, he would draw his sword to help. At that time, thinking about what to do first would be a meaningless argument. That was probably what Celica wanted to say. However, Ragna couldn't bring himself to say he understood her. After all, what she did was truly careless.

Since he couldn't remove his discomfort, Ragna tried to hide it by snatching the map from Celica.

"Ah. My map!"

"Lend me it. It's useless in your possession."

Though, anyone wouldn't be able to make any sense from the sketchy map by seeing it.

"But Ragna, you've lost your memories, right? Moreover, I think it's better if I hold on to it."

"Nope. I'll trust you only when you lose your memory."

"I see, that might work! Maybe that way I can stop getting lost!"

"So we really ARE lost!"

"Ah. Oops."

Whoosh. Celica clamped her hands over her mouth.

An emotion that was neither irritation nor shock appeared. Unsatisfied, Ragna walked to her with a trembling functional left hand, wondering if he should hit her.

Just after he took a step, a gust of wind suddenly slashed across and thrust itself between them.

"Wha...!?"

"Hyah!?"

Ragna jumped back and Celica ducked.

This time, a short figure wearing a low hood stood up. Within the shade of the hood, a pair of sharp eyes peeked out and shone, focusing on Ragna.

The abnormally large hand discharged a single swing of sword. The gleaming drawn sword pointed at Ragna, deciding him as its target.

"Who the hell are you, asshole?!"

Ragna yelled at the unexpected intruder.

He was shorter than Ragna, shorter than even Celica. Even with the tiny figure, his lowered stance surprisingly lacked any opening.

"Only a traveler passin' by."

The small intruder replied using a male voice which clearly didn't fit with his appearance at all. Though the voice intonation sounded young, his composed way of speaking and the unwavering point of his sword suggested his capability.

Ragna grabbed the handle of the sword that he had returned to his waist not too long ago. His heart beat faster.

"I ain't the type to meddle in someone's problem. But I can't just shut my mouth an' walk away when I see a frail woman got attacked by a bastard deep in the mountain."

"Huh? Wait a sec. I'm not attacking anyone..."

Just as Ragna was about to explain himself, the hooded man made his move.

It was similar to a squall.

Ragna barely caught his breath as he reflexively drew his sword. Immediately, a sword and a katana clashed in front of his eyes, scattering red sparks.

"It's shameful to make cheap excuses. Ye written yer sins, scoundrel!?"

Before Ragna's eye, the fearless hooded man grinned.

Ragna's eye widened in surprise at the hooded man's true appearance.

"Beastkin!?"

The face of the man, who intended to slice Ragna, wasn't that of a human.

The hidden face was that of a beast, complete with white and dark brown fur. The protruding nose tip got a darker tawny brown fur.

His symmetrical eyes were large and their pupils stretched vertically. His sneering lips were slim, and within the gap, short but sharp fangs peeked.

On closer look, there were a set of triangular ears on the hood. If his back was to be observed, you could find the katana's scabbard attached and two split long tails swaying around.

The cat-faced man revealed his amused laughter

"Know about beastkin, eh? What an interestin' chap."

"Kuh...!"

The beastkin unleashed his swordplay one after another. Ragna had to use all his strength to handle it.

His clothes got torn, and along with it pain ran across Ragna's shoulder.

Barely able to block the huge swing from the katana, Ragna's left hand trembled because of the big impact.

The impact also made his mind shake.

Dizziness appeared. Deep within his mind, fragments of memories seemed to be saying something.

(I... Do I know this guy?)

He heard this voice somewhere. He recognized the face and the eyes.

"You... Are you Jubei?"

The white haze that had always locked up his memories started to crack. He could feel pieces of it crumbling. Things he had forgotten slowly flooded his mind.

Jubei. A cat-type beastkin that once had taught Ragna how to wield a blade.

Two-toned dark brown and white fur, tan pupils, and two parts of a branching tail. The voice also matched. Ragna, who had a katana pointed at him, thought that the beastkin had too many resemblances to his master.

But there was one thing definitely wrong. His master had an eye patch covering his right eye, while the beastkin before him didn't.

(Is he the wrong guy...?)

While Ragna was lost in his thought, the beastkin moved.

Using the blade's intersection point as the center of gravity, he twisted his small body like a spring and landed a kick on Ragna's abdomen. Against the unusual attack, Ragna was blown off backward and groaned.

"Jubei? Who's that fella?"

While he was preparing the sword again, the beastkin's cat-face twisted into a dubious look as he asked.

Ragna swallowed his vomit back and coughed as he rose. He held his slightly disordered head and shook it lightly.

"Tch... You can't possibly know nothing about him. He's one of the Six Heroes who beat the Black Beast a hundred years ago."

That's right. The Six Heroes.

One hundred years ago, a group of six people who happened to be heroes had defeated the Black Beast. For the Black Beast to exist despite that was ridiculous.

However, Ragna could see the beastkin's facial expression grow even more warped as his dubiousness increased.

"Beat... the Black Beast? Hey, if yer tryin' to be funny, I'm not laughin', y'know."

"I'm not joking. Seriously, you really don't know Jubei!?"

Losing his patience, Ragna raised his voice. He couldn't believe there was a person who didn't know Jubei's name—even more when it came from a cat-type beastkin.

But the young cat man who resembled his master just stared at him suspiciously while shaking his head.

"Dunno. Also, the name's Mitsuyoshi. Ye speak like me, but I never met whatever guy yer spoutin' as someone who beat the Black Beast!"

The man who called himself Mitsuyoshi became more cautious and abruptly narrowed his cat eyes. He was preparing his sharp claws and katana.

"Tryin' to confuse me and escape will get ye nowhere! Prepare yerself, scoundrel!"

With an unworldly physical strength, he kicked the ground with the small feet. Instantly, he leaped straight to Ragna.

Too fast. The approaching wind pressure made such a burden to Ragna's head, caused him grogginess. He couldn't move at all.

A moment after, he caught a short breath...

"Stoooooooooop!"

The moment the girl's scream was heard, Mitsuyoshi's katana stopped.

Between Ragna and Mitsuyoshi, there was a slight gap where a person might be able to slip into. Celica had leaped into the gap.

The silver blade tip had been aimed at Ragna's chest. It was now pointed to Celica's forehead.

Celica slightly opened her eyes. She had spread both of her arms as if to protect Ragna.

Ragna and Mitsuyoshi's eyes opened wide in surprise. Several seconds later, the stiff tension slowly began to dissipate. Feeling the same sense of relief, both Ragna and Mitsuyoshi instinctively dropped their respective weapons.

In the deserted village within the mountain from before, there was an overgrown weed field. Ragna had been sitting on it, while receiving treatment for his slashed shoulder.

Celica's hands were shining, warm but faint. Her fingertips traced the sliced skin's surface to heal the wound. The warm light gave such a strange feeling that couldn't be put into words.

"Hahaha. So that's what happened. In short, ye collapsed and got memory loss, huh?! Ye should've told me sooner."

Mitsuyoshi had received the explanation from Celica. He slapped his furry knee with his bulky paws, and burst into laughter happily.

Hearing that, Ragna scowled and glared at him.

"The one who actually didn't listen to my side of story and proceeded to cut me is you."

"Is that right? Well, I thought a pretty girl got attacked by a mountain bandit. It ain't possible to think otherwise, y'know? Why woulda pretty young lady be goin' inside a deserted mountain? Why, she got kidnapped by a bandit, that's why."

"...Yet she didn't."

Resting his chin on the knees, Ragna glanced at Celica.

"Ah, ahahaha... I-I guess I was kind of lost..."

Laughing awkwardly, Celica put Ragna's cured shoulder back in his red jacket.

Mitsuyoshi continued to laugh merrily.

"A collapsed person an' a lost child, eh. I met many kinds of people on my long trip, but this is the first time I met such an amusin' combination."

"And that's where a misunderstanding beastkin freak comes in."

"Don't say such a bad thing. It's not very polite. Don't be fussin' over minor details."

Jubei kept laughing hard and Ragna watched him with a sullen face.

Mitsuyoshi said he had no relation to Jubei. It's true that he didn't wear an eyepatch, but Ragna also felt that Mitsuyoshi gave a different impression than the Jubei he remembered.

Ragna knew that Mitsuyoshi was a different person, although the beastkin bore many resemblances to his master. He didn't find the situation to be amusing or appreciated, however.

"Still, why would you come here, Mitsuyoshi-san? Though... this might sound weird coming from me, but this place is in the middle of a mountain and not many people pass through here."

Celica let out a strained smile while she asked the question. She at least understood the 'not many people pass through' part. Regarding that one point only, Ragna and Mitsuyoshi had a slightly better opinion of Celica.

"I... went to Japan searchin' fer somebody. I heard there's a boat leavin' fer Japan at the port city at the bottom of this mountain. Passin' through here seemed to be the fastest way. In other words, a shortcut."

"Ah, shortcut! Then, I was also taking the shortcut..."

"That's not true."

"...Okay."

At Ragna's interruption, Celica's shoulders dropped. She seemed to be finally aware of her poor sense of direction.

Celica then let out a "hm?" voice as if noticing something. The tied long hair sprung up as she raised her head.

"Japan? Mitsuyoshi-san is also going to Japan?"

"Also? Ye mean y'all goin' there?"

"Yup, that's right! I'm also searching for someone. Guess we're the same, then."

With a friendly smile, Celica stared at Mitsuyoshi with her innocent eyes.

Mitsuyoshi looked astonished. His large triangular ears flapped about.

"That face... Is that the face of someone who wants to tag along to Japan?"

"Look, aren't we fellow travelers? Also, we have to bring Ragna to the town. It'll be more reassuring if we can go along with Mitsuyoshi-san, right?"

"You're smarter than you look, ma'am..."

Celica stared at Mitsuyoshi with begging eyes. Ragna looked at them both and raised his eyebrows as a silent reply to Mitsuyoshi.

"...Guess it can't be helped. If I were to leave ye two here, it'd be like leavin' ye to rot. I won't have a nice sleep."

"That's great~. Thank you, Mitsuyoshi-san."

"Seriously, thank you. I don't have any confidence getting down the mountain with her. I mean, I'm sure it'd be a disaster."

Standing beside Celica, Ragna bowed deeply. He was truly showing his gratitude.

Mitsuyoshi's cat face made a wry smile.

"Don’t ye worry about it. After all, I'm not some heartless demon."

And then suddenly his tails straightened out as if remembering something.

"Oh yeah, Celica. If you're goin' to Japan, then ye must've a connection to it, right? Ye mind if I ask ye a few questions?"

"It's about the person Mitsuyoshi-san's looking for, isn't it? If I can help you, sure."

"Well, this is unlikely, but I'm just makin' sure. Have ye ever heard of a scientist named Shuuichirou Ayatsuki?"

Not really expecting anything, Mitsuyoshi asked in a light tone. But suddenly, his nose started twitching after Celica changed her expression.

Ragna once again turned to the girl beside him and frowned.

Celica had a shocked look, as if her soul had left her. Her face was reflected on the cat man's big tawny eyes.

She was speechless for such a long time. Soon, she answered faintly.

"He's... my father."

Just after the silence, Celica, with rising vigor, leaned forward. Crawling over the weeds, she went closer to Mitsuyoshi.

"W-Why are you searching for my father!? Are you related to his research? In that case, perhaps you know his whereabouts?"

"Hey, Celica. Calm down a bit."

Ragna reached out his arm to calm Celica, whose gaze was piercing Mitsuyoshi. Celica brushed it off, however, and leaned her body even further.

"I, too, am searching for Shuuichirou Ayatsuki. Six years ago, before the attack of the Black Beast and the following nuclear strike, he was supposed to be in Japan. But after all that, I haven't been able to get in touch with him. At last, there have recently been ships heading for Japan. Because of that...!"

No matter how much time passed, she couldn't confirm her father's welfare. Believing that no one had been searching for him, she left her home without grabbing the right map.

Celica had been overcome by her emotions. She grabbed Mitsuyoshi's soft paws tightly with both of her hands.

"Please. If you know something about my father, please tell me."

Mitsuyoshi looked troubled. He had something disheartening to say, judging by his expression.

The cat man's unwillingness to answer made Celica's anxiety grow stronger. His mouth looked like something big was about to burst from within. Before long, he heavily opened it.

"I'm sorry... There ain't any specific place reported that I know of. Also, I ain't one of yer old man's research buddies, companions, or pals. This is just a mission."

"Mission?"

The one who cut the conversation with a question was Ragna. Mitsuyoshi furrowed his eyebrows and pulled his chin backward.

"That's right... It's to find Shuuichirou Ayatsuki, the scientist who put mankind to unimaginable crisis, an' bring 'im back to the client. That's my mission."

Celica gathered the new information to her mind. She couldn't believe it. Her pupils flickered, face paling. Her father had been said to be someone related to the crisis concerning mankind.

"It has to be a mistake, isn't it? Father would never do any dangerous research."

"It's from the information. I don't know the details of the research, but Shuuichiruo Ayatsuki's experiments made that thing appeared."

"That thing...?"

Even if she didn't ask him, Celica could guess what Mitsuyoshi was about to say.

"The Black Beast."

Celica gasped. Ragna's eye went wide.

By pressing the lips with her fingers, she covered her mouth. Celica weakly shook her head.

"...It's a lie, isn't it?"

Mitsuyoshi kept silent, but his seriousness could be seen from his eyes that contained no falsehood. It alone was enough as an answer. Celica's fingertips slightly trembled.

"But that—such a thing couldn't possibly be born from his personal research...!"

"I got a doubt as well. I didn't think Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's intention was to create the Black Beast. But it's a safe bet to think that he must have done somethin' in his research to awaken that monster. For the sake of determinin' the cause, I have to search 'im no matter what."

The Black Beast.

It manifested all of a sudden. The monster crushed the place it was born. It vanished after its fangs annihilated everything. Then, it abruptly appeared again somewhere.

It could not be constrained within every man-defined system and theory. If any, it was as if the very concepts of system and theory were something to be destroyed. It was truly a being that was all about destruction.

Even Ragna knew and remembered what kind of monster the Black Beast was. It was outrageous to think that it was unleashed by the hands of Celica's father.

"I can't believe it. Father would never..."

Tears welling up, Celica embraced her trembling fingertips to her chest. Her previous vigor when leaning her body forward seemed to be gone as she weakly sat down on the weeds.

Witnessing that, Mitsuyoshi dropped his shoulders and sighed while slowly standing up.

"...We're lookin' fer the same person, but maybe we can't work together after all. I'll escort ye two until the port city. After that, we're splittin' up."

Mitsuyoshi was being considerate, but Celica shook her head as if clearing it from something, and made her bundled up hair swing around.

"No... No, you can't do that! I will go along with Mitsuyoshi-san!"

"Hey, hey, young lady. Don't you understand? I'm on the opposin' side of yer old man, y'know?"

"I know. That's why I'm doing this. I want to know what Father has truly done. If Father was actually innocent, I'll protect him from Mitsuyoshi-san."

Before her face had been on the verge of crying, and yet Celica raised her chin and looked straight to Mitsuyoshi.

Mitsuyoshi pulled himself back, twitching where a part of a human's forehead would be.

"Now, look here... It's certain that Shuuichirou Ayatsuki has somethin' to do with Black Beast. I got no doubt about it. Besides, do ye think I would've just kindly guided the way for someone who just up and declared to interfere with my mission?"

"But I won't know the truth if Father has really done bad things if I don't make sure of it. He may have just got caught in all of it!"

"I don't have the time to play detective with ya. Doin' it will be nothin' but trouble."

"Please, I won't disturb your investigation! Besides, I can discern Father's belongings. I also remember his handwritings and writing habits. I'll be useful, so...!"

Squeezing both hands tightly, Celica kept being persistent.

Mitsuyoshi scratched his throat using his big hand. He was bewildered. He had plenty of reasons to refuse her, but Celica's enthusiasm really portrayed her seriousness. To just flat out reject her would be a bit awkward.

Seeing all of that, Ragna, who was observing the development from the beginning, sighed and interrupted.

"Isn't it fine? Just bring her along."

"Ragna!"

"C'mon. Not ya too...!"

Poof, Celica's face lightened up in contrast to Mitsuyoshi's darkening one.

The girl and the cat beastkin. Their confrontation made Ragna sneer. The spectacle looked more like something out of a fairy tale rather than a delicate issue.

"It's not a hassle if you can just dump her somewhere whevener she becomes a nuisance, right? Besides, Celica is a healing magic user. You can't deny her of being a useful companion... when you're not trusting her with maps, that is."

"I'll just keep it short. First, it's dangerous!"

"More reason to bring her."

Ragna had been sitting on the weed with his legs crossed. He gazed at the troubled Mitsuyoshi and expectant Celica one by one.

"If you want someone to look over her, I guess I can tag along, too. If anything happens, I'll grab her and run."

In any case, he didn't have anything to be done soon. Even then his goal was much further away than their current destination.

"Thank you, Ragna!"

"Uwah!"

As Ragna was shrugging and saying those words, Celica, excessively joyful, jumped at him. On the opposite, Mitsuyoshi, full of resignation, was holding his forehead.

"Oh man. I picked up some unexpected burdens..."

Getting caught between two people with contrastive reactions, Ragna once again departed from the deserted village within the mountain.

And after a few hours, the sun had descended as it was the time for the sky to be dyed in the colors of night. Ragna and Celica, along with Mitsuyoshi, were able to reach the port city on the bottom without any disaster.

Chapter 2: Destructive Black

———Log 3

Lately, Relius has been doing stuff on his own.

I knew that he was a man who did everything based on his own convenience for all this time. But recently, my inquiry for an explanation has not yet received any outright answer.

Perhaps, it's because of the snake man from the other day.

...I have an unpleasant feeling. Still, I can't keep dwelling on it if I don't want to be a failure of a scientist.

What on earth is that green haired man trying to create? To begin with, what sort of a man is he?

Based on the given documents, it seems the Original Unit was supposedly retrieved from the Alucard family.

But, to say that the Original Unit will be provided itself in the first place is truly bizarre.

Even then, the moment it was brought up from the first division, the government immediately concealed its existence.

Is he one of the government's officials?

Once Relius becomes engrossed to his research, he is oblivious to concerning factors that should be recognized.

If there is to be an unexpected occurrence, I should come up with some sort of a countermeasure.

By the time they had finished searching for a vacant lodging, rented some rooms, and settled down, night came down upon the seaside port city.

They got their dinner after rushing to a nearly closed bakery. Finished with dinner, Mitsuyoshi left to gather intelligence. Meanwhile, Celica returned to her room to sleep early.

While Ragna was waiting for Mitsuyoshi's return in a room beside Celica's, his thoughts wandered to the view outside the window.

The hotel didn't have any food service. Although it was close to the harbor, he could not see the sea due to the room's position. What he could see were cramped rows of square buildings and the surrounding streets which were only illuminated by nothing but the occasional tiny street lamp.

Although the scenery was only separated by a single layer of thin glass, it seemed so awfully far.

Perhaps he never had any knowledge about this city. It was not only what he could see, but he also didn't have any memory of how the atmosphere felt like.

An unknown self within an unknown land. It was very uncertain and vague. He felt a bit tired thinking about it.

No, what he could not remember was not only this city. Perhaps the world was foreign, too. If what Celica and Mitsuyoshi said were true, then the Black Beast would still be present, although it should had been destroyed a hundred years ago according to his memory.

"...Hm?"

Suddenly, he noticed a figure from outside the window. Ragna lifted his head after he'd rested it on his hand.

A back hidden by black mantle. Light brown hair tied up near the roots. It was Celica.

It wasn't the time for a young girl to be walking around alone. Ragna hurriedly stood up while furrowing his eyebrows.

"Sheesh. That girl keeps getting my hands full!"

If he let that hopeless person who had no sense of direction wander aimlessly in the city at night, she undoubtedly would not return back.

Ragna unconsciously clicked his tongue while snatching his sword. Then, he rushed out of the room.

He stepped out and felt just what someone would expect from a seaside port city. The wind blowing westward felt damp. There was a smell of salt in it.

Rushing out from the small room, Ragna hurriedly checked around. Celica was nowhere to be found. If he was not mistaken, Celica got out of her room and was supposedly taking the path towards the seashore.

Ragna turned his head to various directions while running along the paved streets. The stones covering all over the streets were jagged and hard, making it difficult to thread on.

Leaving the thin path to a gentle hill road, the view of the dark sea spread before his eye. His field of vision expanded simultaneously as the sea breeze whirled up and blew against Ragna. It made his white hair flutter violently.

An unknown scenery. But it wasn't clear whether if it was because he lost his memory or he never knew about it in the first place. It made the sorrow within his heart expand.

This wasn't the time to get sentimental. Ragna slid his hair that was obstructing the view and looked around his surroundings, searching for that careless girl.

There.

On the promenade protruding to the sea. Its floor tiles were lined up to imitate bricks. There was a short staircase with a semi-circular platform on its end. Two old fashioned benches were encircled within silver railings.

A familiar person was leaning on the simple vertical railing as the sea breeze played around with the figure's lengthy hair.

"...Hey."

Stepping down from the short staircase, Ragna stood next to Celica.

Celica turned around and made her ponytail swing.

"Wah! You scared me."

"Don't go wandering around by yourself. You'll get lost again."

"No way, I shouldn't get lost again. The hotel is just over there."

"If it wasn't coming from you, I'd believe it without a doubt."

Celica pointed somewhere, but it wasn't where the hotel was located. Ragna dejectedly dropped his shoulders as a response.

While glancing at Celica who still had not yet moved from the spot she was found, Ragna leaned his back to the railing and shifted his weight to it.

It was such a peaceful place. There wasn't any stores or any people around.

On the opposite side of the promenade, he could sometimes see a figure passing by. But this place felt like it was in a different dimension compared to that side.

The sea wind was refreshing. If you just stood there, you would lose track of time.

"...What are you doing in a place like this?"

Ragna asked a question. Celica returned her gaze to the sea as she smiled.

"I was wondering if I could see Japan from here."

"Japan?"

Ragna also turned his sight to the sea.

Rather than sea, what he could see was unfolding darkness.

The ground lamps' reflections on the water were glimmering and flickering. As if following the lines of light, his gaze shifted to the distant horizon.

The line separating sky and sea was quite blurry.

"You can see it from here?"

"Don’t know. I was thinking it'd be nice if I could."

"Ahaha," Celica let out a small laugh. From the beginning, she knew she wouldn't be able see it. However, Japan, the place where her father might be, was very close to the port town. She realized that much.

But as a person who lost his memory, Ragna hardly understood that feeling.

"...Your father has been missing for more than six years, right?"

The Black Beast manifested in Japan. As a result, a nuclear strike had to be done to defeat it. Before the bombing had begun, Celica's father was already missing.

Ragna frowned.

"Sorry to say this, but... you sure he's alive?"

How much was the chance for him to survive if he was in Japan at that time?

"If you go, you might end up regretting it."

"Umm..."

Celica gave neither affirmation nor denial as an answer. She rested her arms on the railing. Then, she put her chin on top of her arms and stared at the horizon.

"...In my family, there's only my father and sister left."

Celica spoke. Her words were mixed with the night wind's whisper.

"When I was a child, Mother died of sickness. After that, Father, being a scientist, would always be holed up in his lab to do complicated research. Onee-chan and I enrolled in some place called the Magic Guild. Since she's a brilliant student, somehow, she got chosen to become a part of the Ten Saints."

"Ten Saints?"

"Err. It's a group of ten extraordinary people, specially selected from within the Magic Guild."

"I don't really get it, but they sound amazing."

Ragna said casually, making Celica's face brighten up.

"You got that right. They're really amazing!"

She seemed to be really proud of her sister. She was so simple minded and Ragna couldn't help but chuckle.

In high spirits, Celica took in a deep breath of the sea breeze.

"As for Father, he won many awards and gave lectures at many universities. He's a truly great scholar. When I was a child, I used to believe that Father was the most hardworking person in the world. I feel unworthy of having those wonderful persons as my family. ...Well, the relationship between them isn't exactly on best terms."

"Is that so?"

"Yup. Especially Onee-chan. She reaaaaally hates Father. I don't know the reason, but she seems to dislike it when I talk about him."

Although she said it cheerfully, there was sadness as salty as the sea deep within Celica's voice. However, it didn't make her voice waver. Their conflict didn't even bother her.

"Even then, both of them are irreplaceable and important family to me."

Celica gently turned her face to Ragna. Looking straight at her big eyes, Ragna was spontaneously taken aback.

While Ragna was still confused, Celica, with the expression of a dreaming child, continued.

"Many months ago, the UN rescue team relayed news that they had found survivors in Japan. Unable to leave Japan before the nuclear strike, they had to live in ruins for six years. Although some areas were still considered hazardous, Japan has recently been reopened to the public."

Even in the darkness, Ragna could see a pure hope shining within Celica's eyes.

"I believed my father was dead for a long time. But after I heard the news, I started wondering if he had survived. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Soon, I couldn't just wait patiently anymore."

"That's how you came to be here?"

She didn't have any definite clue or a ground-breaking method to find her father. With such condition, Celica kept aiming to go to Japan without hesitation. She was either that determined or just a simply doing it blindly. Ragna believed she was the former.

"Your sister doesn't worry about you?"

His admiration turned to a bitter smile as Ragna asked her. Celica shrugged and smiled mischievously.

"She probably does. She'll probably horribly scold me when I get back."

"But you'll still search for your old man, right?"

"Of course."

Celica didn't hesitate at all. She was the type that wouldn't waver once a decision had been made.

Celica straightened herself after leaning on the railing. She lifted her chin and gazed on the horizon. She seemed to be staring at Japan itself, which was on the other side.

"After all, he's my family. When you don’t know what happened, wouldn't you worry? When I realized he might be alive, shouldn't I be searching for him?"

For some reason, Celica's serious tone got stuck on Ragna's chest.

Celica's gentle eyes didn't have the slightest worry in them. She boldly stared at Ragna.

She was just worried. That was her only reason to act... Ragna couldn't help but feel envious.

Celica smiled without a single worry.

"I love Onee-chan and Father very much."

Again. Ragna once again did his habit to press his temples.

Ragna had seen someone like this before. Someone smiled like this. When was it? And like what Celica did to her sister, he had once been called brother by...

"Ow..."

It felt like his head's contents were squeezing and causing him great pain. Ragna's face warped. Celica's expression changed and then she touched Ragna's head with the back of her hand.

"Are you okay? Shouldn't you rest, Ragna?"

"...I'm fine. It's not my body that's actually bad."

It's just when he tried to remember things, immediately he got hit by head-splitting pain.

Softly nursing him, Celica brushed Ragna's hair. Her fingertips were shining and felt slightly warm. It was only a little bit, but the painful headache was subsiding.

Being treated like a little kid for his injury. Ragna felt rather awkward.

"Really... it'd be gone after a while. You don't have to use magic for a thing like this."

"Don't worry. I'm doing this because I want to. Besides, it's free. 'Kay?" Celica said with a smile. It also made Ragna laugh a little.

"Said no one but you. This isn't the problem of free or not. Normally, mages won't recklessly use magic that easily, right?"

"Really? Since I'm able to use magic, wouldn't it better if I make use of it?"

Seeing Celica tilted her head to the side while touching a cheek with her fingertip, Ragna couldn't keep his cool. A conversation with her would clear any hatred and let your face loosen up.

His headache was completely gone.

"You're such a weirdo."

"Eeeeeh? I don't want to hear that from Ragna."

"Is that so? Compared to your non-existent sense of direction and overoptimism, my memory loss is awfully trivial."

"That's absolutely wrong. After all, this is the first time I meet an amnesiac person."

"Well then, surely you've met someone as directionally impaired as you?"

"I have a normal sense of direction."

"Huh!?"

Ragna spontaneously raised his voice in disbelief.

It must have been amusing since Celica giggled. Her gentle smile comforted Ragna.

A freezing breeze blew from the sea. Turning to face it, Celica took another glance at the sea.

"...We should get back soon."

"Yeah, you're right. If we catch a cold and end up missing the boat for tomorrow, everything will be for nothing."

"Yup."

With still a bit of regret, Celica nodded.

Not wanting to force her, Ragna started to walk. His hard shoes tapped on the tiles' surface. Soon after, Celica's small footsteps followed him from behind.

After a while, Celica closed the short distance to Ragna and arrived beside him.

Compared to Ragna, the girl was a bit shorter and looked delicate. She often let her guard down and had too many openings. Her soft, thin arms didn't have the capability to fight, let alone the strength to wield a weapon.

For a girl like that to keep up her pace with Ragna was truly a wonder. Truly, a wonder indeed.

Before anyone knew it, the night had gone completely dark. There were even less people walking around the avenue compared to when Ragna came there. The number of houses with lights on was decreasing one by one.

The clouds made it so numerous stars couldn't be viewed. Under such a night sky, Ragna and Celica continued tracing the dark street back to their hotel.

The straight road branched to many side streets along the way. At the end of it, a bustling main street could be seen. The lights there were flickering.

Ragna swiftly shifted his gaze toward those lights by chance. At the same time, something unusual cut across his sight.

"...!?"

His breath became shorter. Ragna reflexively halted his feet and turned around. At the end of the road, there were many bright street lights standing side by side.

Now, right in the middle of them, there was a person. He got a hunch that he knew the person's face.

No, saying it was just a hunch would imply that the details were vague. When he gazed at that person, even if it was for less than a second, he certainly saw them.

Beautiful golden hair tied up to two parts. Two big ribbons served as a hair decoration. A young girl wearing a black dress...

"Wh—H-Hey, Ragna!?"

Before he knew it, Ragna broke into a run. He could hear Celica's voice from behind, but he couldn't afford to turn around.

That girl definitely had something to do with his memory. It was just like the first time he saw Mitsuyoshi. He felt something similar as when he noticed the resemblance on Mitsuyoshi that made him recall Jubei.

Moving toward the main street, Ragna searched for the little figure he had lost sight of. On the other side of the crowd. He saw a small shadow walking away to a mild curve.

"Hey, wait! Rabbit!!"

Ragna yelled as he jumped to the crowd.

Instantly, it felt like all kinds of sound had vanished.

At the end of the rough old street, the figure Ragna was chasing before had stopped. Her long blond hair swung as she turned around. Ragna stared at her deep-red eyes which were similar to a white rabbit's.

Rachel Alucard.

That name was engraved within Ragna's brain, as if it was burned in.

That's right. He remembered. She was the magic user Ragna had seen long before he saw Celica's healing magic. An old acquaintance. The girl used teleport suddenly near him, hurled insults and sarcasm to irritate him, and then leave abruptly.

Nonetheless, she had lived far longer than Ragna. She might look innocent, but she was actually a vampire.

If it was her, then she must have known. Who he really was. Why he was in a place like this. Why his was memory gone. What he should do to get his memory back.

However, Ragna felt uncomfortable at the same time.

(Is she really... that rabbit?)

Something was different. The Rachel from his memory. The black-dressed girl who was facing him from a part of the port city. They were not identical. That cheeky vampire he knew was more arrogant and bewitching.

"Ah... W-Wait! I freaking said wait, you damn rabbit!"

The girl who was standing on the end of the road suddenly slipped from his sight. That time, she continued walking, leaving Ragna behind.

Ragna hurriedly chased after her. Pushing through the drunken crowds, he collided with a man who was on the way home from work.

However, when he arrived at the spot where the Rachel from before stood, his feet stopped.

She was not there. The other party just walked leisurely, yet he was running at full speed. While he was not fast enough to chase her, the speed difference wasn't that big enough to lose sight of her.

"Tch... She teleported."

If that really was Rachel, it was not strange for her to vanish just like that. For better or worse, the fact that she disappeared served as further proof that the girl from before was indeed *Rachel Alucard*.

"Why the hell is she here...?"

Furthermore, to think back upon, she seemed to be unusually young. Rachel had always looked like a 12-year-old. But that girl seemed to be even younger.

"Shit. The hell's going on here!?"

His mind was filled with murmurs. Frankly, it was really unpleasant.

He considered running around the whole town to look for her, but he immediately brushed it off. If she was truly Rachel, then she wouldn't be in a place where Ragna could easily reach. If she was not Rachel, then searching for her would be meaningless.

As if he was being played around, Ragna got annoyed. However, there was nothing more he could do. Ragna trampled an empty can which was rolling on the roadside in his irritation. Then, he returned to the path where he came from.

He felt as if the moon behind those dark clouds was ridiculing him.

The next morning. The sky was a bit dark, but there were few clouds left and the weather was clear.

Anchored neatly on one corner of a port, the ship departed right on time and had arrived on the east archipelago carrying the few passengers it brought.

Japan. Once, it held a great number of large cities, while it also had peaceful rural areas. There were mountains stretching out and forests covering them. Countless rivers were flowing alongside the archipelago. ...Now, most of them had been transformed to scorched earth. The grounds had been burned. The mountains had been leveled. The rivers had run dry. The vegetation withered.

It was like the portrait of despair itself.

"Hang on a sec. I got somethin' to tell 'im."

After they were getting down to the harbor, Mitsuyoshi called out a nearby soldier and left with him somewhere.

A while had passed and Mitsuyoshi returned. The person with him was no longer a petty soldier; instead he looked like someone with authority. Along with them, a truck was slowly coming in close from behind.

"The fella's gonna get us around this vicinity."

Mitsuyoshi nonchalantly introduced the person beside him as the one in charge of the naval base, all while wagging his tail.

"Mi-Mitsuyoshi-san, just who are you...?"

Currently, the ruins of a country formerly called Japan were in the United Nations' control. Every men stationed within the site were members of the United Nations' forces.

Despite being dumbfounded by the extremely efficient method of procuring transportation, Celica asked the question to Mitsuyoshi.

Mitsuyoshi, unusually showing off by exhibiting a smirk, answered.

"Well, I can't tell ye that one."

Currently, Ragna's group was heading eastward from the western part while being inside the back tray of the UN force's truck. They could feel the shaking as they got across the devastated lands of Japan.

The big scale of shakings they felt when inside the back tray was awfully unpleasant. However, seeing the scenery around them felt much worse.

"This is... Japan?"

Grimacing, Ragna muttered while looking at the depressing scenery.

Once, people lived in this island. It was a large country. Looking at the sight before him, it was hard to imagine that such a thing could happen.

"The old Japan and the current one are completely different."

Next to Ragna, Celica whispered.

The truck seemed to have run over something as the shaking was really hard.

"Long ago, it was more like a normal country. But six years ago, a lot of nuclear missiles were fired in order to defeat the Black Beast..."

"Nuclear missiles?"

A word unknown to Ragna. Celica wondered on how she should explain it.

"Hmm. I guess... It's a weapon with an extremely hot blast that burns away anything."

It burned cities, forests, and grounds, but not its objective, the Black Beast.

"Everything was flattened. Many terrains were sinking. Now, both the water and soils were contaminated with radioactive and chemical substances. It became a place no one could live in."

Furthermore, the area where the missiles were dropped had its air polluted with high concentration of radioactivity around the vicinity. If there weren't any of radioactive masks and suits, or magic which serves the same purpose, then just breathing would be a matter of life and death.

Ragna wasn't sure if the true cause of this disastrous scene he saw was the Black Beast or those nuclear missiles. While looking at the scenery unfolding before him, Ragna unconsciously sighed.

"With things looking like this, I'd say both the Black Beast and man's weapons are the same shit. ...At the very least, I want to fight as a human being."

"...You're right. It'd be nice if it were possible."

Celica changed her posture to squatting position as she had been sitting uncomfortably inside the truck's back tray. Her butt was sore from getting hit each time the truck shook. Then again, the truck was the most comfortable ride that could be prepared back at the naval base.

"In the end, the country called Japan was lost just like that. The annihilation of Japan is what some people called it... But I'm not that fond with the term."

"Why?"

"Because the land itself is still there. If all the waste can be cleaned up, then the beautiful land and fresh air may be able to return once more. And then, a clean rain will pour down and pure water can gather. Once the pretty grass grows, small bugs will appear. In just a hundred years, won't Japan be able to revive once again?"

"Quite a dream ye got there, young lady."

The one who interrupted was Mitsuyoshi, who had been silent until now. Unlike a cat, he tried to look cool by leaning against the canopy of the truck's back tray, all while having his short legs crossed.

Even after hearing his sarcasm, it only made Celica's eyes sparkle more as she smiled.

"But don't you feel it'd be wonderful?"

Celica replied while the truck carrying them continued to travel along the parched ground of the wasteland. Before, it was such a large and spacious road along a river. Now, one could only find road fragments and remains of a burnt traffic sign if the eyes were strained. That was the actual state of the remnants of that area.

"Actually, Japan was the birthplace of my father. Father and Mother met in Japan and their marriage also took place here."

That was why she didn't want the country to just disappear, no matter what its condition was. Celica's eyes flickered as they were filled with those important moments.

Mitsuyoshi smiled bitterly as the edge of his mouth got slightly warped.

"...Japan is my hometown too, y'know? Though it may be hard, if its future will be like Celica said, that certainly ain't a bad thing."

"Right?" said Celica with a smile.

Ragna leaned on his favorite large sword while staring toward the scenery from inside the back tray.

Japan... A place so obliterated no one could set their foot inside.

Although the place where he went to was under control by that army, the fact that means of transportation were still maintained was regardless weird.

After getting down from the truck, Ragna's group walked toward a vast collapsed city within the wasteland. Six years ago, a number of people were living their ordinary lives here.

But now, there were broken pieces from a highway hidden beneath the sand. Rows of houses were blown to ruins. Many steel bars from buildings were able to narrowly avoid destruction. They were planted diagonally on the wasteland as if they were growing upward.

Ragna thought about something when he first stepped into Japan and thought it again while he was walking through the ruins. It looked awful.

If this was the aftereffect from the nuclear weapon that Celica had told him, then it was very powerful and brutal. Only death would await those people six years ago. But if this was caused by the Black Beast instead, then the being was just that terrifying.

By the time those nuclear missiles launched, the entire city's inhabitants were already evacuated. Since there was no army or government around, only the three of them were within this abandoned building. It was absolutely quiet there.

On this vicinity, the radioactivity was thin. But just to be safe, some masks had been distributed, although the protective suits were deemed unnecessary.

"...It's here."

Mitsuyoshi instructed the group to stop at an outskirt of the abandoned building.

Compared to the surrounding buildings, it could be guessed that it was a research facility which had a quite spacious area. The construction itself was partially destroyed and there were burn marks all over it.

That was where Celica's father once had worked.

"I... When I was a child, I went here once. But now, this building looks completely different."

Looking up at the black stained building, Celica seemed sad as she muttered.

Many cities were destroyed. Japan was destroyed. Even when she had heard that news, the impact felt different compared to when she saw it with her own eyes.

"Father..."

As expected, Celica's voice had uneasiness in it.

Mitsuyoshi walked over pieces of a smashed glass door toward the research facility and called out to them.

"Celica, Ragna. Both of ye come with me. We'll look fer Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's lab."

Once her father's name was mentioned, Celica suddenly jerked her head. It seemed she was reminded of something terrible she didn't want to think about. Ragna tapped on her trembling shoulder.

"You came here to look for him, right?"

For that very reason, she slipped from her sister's sight and arrived here.

Celica put her hands on her chest and slowly took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Yup. Let's go!"

With a firm nod, she went after Mitsuyoshi.

After getting rid of the crumbling door, Ragna peeked inside a men's toilet he had passed by.

"Shuuichirou-saaaaan. You theeeere?"

No response. Rather, it was highly unlikely for a person to be inside. The ceiling had collapsed, meaning if there was someone there, they would have been crushed.

Ragna quickly withdrew his head.

The leading sampling research laboratory in the west. That was what this place once known as.

On the backside of the L-shaped main building, there was a separate building used to conduct technical researches. All the time, studies covering various types of divisions were performed there.

But that was also a story from six years ago. Before the Black Beast's appearance, the research facility seemed to be such a place that had many researchers going back and forth. Now, it was dark since the electricity had been cut off. Only eerie silence was there.

(Well... I'd hate it if this place were noisy.)

Ragna took a quick glance to survey the area. He accidentally saw things that should have been kept hidden. When he thought about it for some more, a shiver ran down his spine.

Amidst the collapsed walls and peeled-off tiles in a corridor, Mitsuyoshi led the group forward. Ragna was at the very back of the group.

Celica was the one who was showing the route. Though, Ragna and Mitsuyoshi only had a half-expectation to her. They were looking for their destination just going by Celica's faint memories, like "it's not underground" and "along the way there's a small courtyard."

Crossing over a river of broken glass, they pushed aside a ruined door which was blocking the corridor. They went deeper and deeper.

Along the way, they opened any door they had noticed. They examined if the room had people or traces of them inside. Still, they could find nothing.

They walked for a little while in the silence of the ruined corridor and exited from a glass door to a courtyard. It was the place where Celica had gone to, led by her father.

Just as they were about to cross a passage to get to a different building, it happened.

"...!?"

As for who was the person who actually gasped, each of them felt that they were the one.

All vegetation in the garden had withered. They had no vigor left based on the appearance as they were rotting. As if blocking the passage to an entrance of the other building, something like a lump of black mist was squirming.

"Wh... What the hell is that thing...?"

In front of Ragna, who just spoke, Mitsuyoshi drew his katana. Imitating him, Ragna also gripped his sword.

It seemed to have claws, but not fangs. It didn't have a stable form, yet would somehow make someone tremble just by looking at it.

It was like looking into a bottomless pit. Just by being in the same place, one was easily forced to imagine that he would be swallowed, crushed, and erased without a trace by the shapeless darkness.

As anyone would expect, that thing seemed to have some sort of consciousness. As if noticing the presence of Ragna's group, it began to vibrate before growing large like a giant wave.

"Tsk. Dodge, Ragna!"

Mitsuyoshi shouted in a sharp voice.

Ragna moved as if he was repelled.

The arm that was holding his sword was now embracing Celica's back, before Ragna forcibly jumped.

Immediately, a huge wave of black mist struck the place where his feet were at. The impact made the surrounding air tremble with intensity while a deep sound like an explosion rang.

Ragna fell onto the ground and landed on his back. He could feel that Celica, who was within his grasp, stiffen. He pushed her behind him and assumed a protective stance.

Instantly, the mist turned its figure around, although the front side was unrecognizable. The sound gave the feel of rough sands being stirred.

The convulsing black mist gathered similar black spray from the surrounding atmosphere by absorbing them. It grew more and more. In the end, it exceeded Ragna's height. Moreover, the mist was so dense and became a thick darkness.

Before, the mist lump's appearance had become what one would call a mass of shadow.

(A mass of...shadow...?)

As he described its appearance, Ragna had an ominous feeling.

"Ragna. That thing... Could it be...?"

Her voice stiffened with disbelief. Celica took a step back out of fear. She probably thought the same words as Ragna did.

The shadow had already grown twice the size of Ragna's height.

A sensation of plain fear could be felt just by looking at it. Not only the fear was visible, but the creeping-up presence made Ragna's skin get goosebumps.

This is dangerous. That was his thought.

The overwhelming giant mass of shadow spread out its main part. Just like a serpent trying to swallow small eggs, its crooked neck aimed at Ragna and Celica all at once.

"Run! This thing is...!"

Ragna was hesitating whether if he should resist the overwhelming pressure or if he should escape. Meanwhile, Mitsuyoshi's small figure leapt out in front of him.

Along with a high jump, he cut a horizontal straight line at the shadow's massive mouth.

With a single somersault, he landed in front of Ragna. From within his back, heavy tension was drifting out.

The shadow that should had been sliced seemed faint and wavered in the air. Eventually, it returned to its original shape as if nothing had happened.

"Hey, Mitsuyoshi! The hell is that thing!?"

Protecting Celica with his back, Ragna was slowly withdrawing while he asked a question.

Slightly separating his sight from the mass of shadow, Mitsuyoshi replied clearly.

"This presence. This stench... It's the Black Beast!"

There was an obvious hostility in Mitsuyoshi's words. Simultaneously, the mass of shadow gushed out black mist to its surroundings. More mist came from the dried-up cracks on the ground silently and surrounded the serpent mass of shadow. Its black-colored large build became more and more large.

"This is the Black Beast...?"

Celica's voice was trembling.

"But why is it here? There's no one or anything left here!"

The Black Beast had only one purpose: destroying. Living beings and soulless objects were an equal for it.

Just before, it was just a silent research facility. Now, it was filled with the sinister presence of the shadow.

Mitsuyoshi lowered his body without lowering his guard. He pointed the tip of his katana to the shadow monster, preparing for another attack.

"Dunno. We can't know what's inside that monster's head. What's important is the fact that it's in front of us now."

"Still, what bad luck."

Mitsuyoshi's ears twitched at Ragna's bitter statement. A slight smile tugged at his lips.

"Bad luck, eh...? Guess people do see it differently."

"Ah? What do you mean?"

"Ragna. Ye just think 'bout guardin' Celica. I'll take on this fella!"

As he quickly said that, Mitsuyoshi leaped.

The shadow composedly wriggled its giant body to attack Mitsuyoshi.

The shadow silently bent its enormous body, meaning to attack, and swooped down on Mitsuyoshi.

Mitsuyoshi did a series of severe slashing strikes using his katana and large claws in response.

"He beat it!?"

"Nah... It isn't that easy."

Hiding behind Ragna, Celica clapped joyfully. However, Ragna grimaced and continued to protect her.

Sliced into two, the black shadow dispersed into mist as if relieving the strain on it. Then immediately, like iron sands gathered by a magnet, it regained its form without a single wound visible.

Lagging behind, Mitsuyoshi landed back on where he was earlier.

He quickly attained his stance back. Behind him, Ragna raised his voice.

"Wait! Nothing's gonna work on it! We should retreat for now and..."

"Retreat? Gimme a break!"

Mitsuyoshi unusually answered with a shout. With his white and dark-brown fur colored back, he stubbornly refused to face Ragna.

It was not clear whether he was going to continue those strong words or not. However, feeling that Mitsuyoshi was going to snap at any time, Ragna's throat tightened.

Looking at the beastkin who resembled his master, Ragna could see that Mitsuyoshi's shoulders were slightly trembling.

"...Japan's my birthplace, my clan's hometown. Fer my brethren an' all who fell victim to it, I shall challenge it, an' kill it! Though it's unexpected that I've finally met my clan's foe... I can't just turn back when it's right theeeeeeeeere!"

With a roar of wrath, Mitsuyoshi's fur ruffled.

There was an unfathomable strength inside the hand that gripped his katana.

That was why Ragna thought Mitsuyoshi should be stopped. But faster than anything Ragna could do, Mitsuyoshi jumped as swift as the wind.

The slashing attack was like flashes of light. It was constituted of the fangs and claws of a cat man who was willing to lose his life.

The anger in his voice was the roar of the brave souls that were once his comrades.

The strength he possessed came from the smiles of their souls.

...That was what Mitsuyoshi believed.

Soaring high, Mitsuyoshi's katana howled. The blade sliced a cross into the mass of shadow.

From the cutting point, the shadow monster started to disperse. It had to be completely blown away before it could reform itself. Mitsuyoshi drew back his arm to unleash another slash.

However.

"Move!"

Ragna shouted.

Mitsuyoshi's eyes opened wide.

The black mist that should have reformed as another mass of shadow betrayed that expectation. Its entire self scattered as mist and simultaneously enveloped Mitsuyoshi.

"UWAAAAAAAAAH!"

As if being crushed by a gigantic opened hand, Mitsuyoshi's body was swallowed by the shrieking mist.

The mist had rebuilt its enormous body and started to condense rapidly. In the midair of the decaying courtyard, it drew even more black mist around the atmosphere and became a shadow-colored orb.

There was an earth-shattering sound. It sounded like a swarm of insects beating their wings. Like a heavy downpour of a rain. Like something being deflected again and again.

"No, don't... Give Mitsuyoshi-san back!"

Pushing aside Celica who rushed out suddenly, Ragna ran. He couldn't guess what was inside that bizarre orb.

Twisting his upper body, he swung his large sword at the black mass. But before the sword make a contact, the shadow squirmed. Something like a whip knocked Ragna away.

"Wha...!?"

The impact was unexpectedly heavy. His breathing along with consciousness were blown off.

Ragna came to his senses after he landed hard on the ground. Adding to the injury, the sword was knocked from his hand and rolled on the ground. Celica ran over from the opposite side, teary eyed.

"Ouch..."

Ragna dragged his weary body and lifted his face. That orb's size was still increasing. It spread an unpleasant noise and squirmed.

Just looking at it had made him feel hopeless. Anxiety swelled out inside his mind; the orb could burst at any moment.

However, those endless thoughts came to an abrupt end.

Celica had dashed out from Ragna's side. She was stretching her hand toward the orb which had captured Mitsuyoshi. Ragna opened his mouth to stop her. Just as the words were about to leave his throat, the black mass suddenly stopped squirming. At the same time, the jarring noise was also stopped.

Then as if it had reached its limit, the mass lost its gathering power and, like an exploding water balloon, fell down to ground as mist.

The mist got absorbed by the ground, just like water. Then it vanished, without a trace.

After a while, all that was left behind was only Mitsuyoshi, covered in wounds.

"What the hell just happened...?"

Within the rotting courtyard inside the research facility, Ragna was sitting on hard ground and muttered, dumbfounded.

His mind could not calmly comprehend what had happened. Just what was that black mist? What was the Black Beast?

He noticed that his back was completely drenched with cold sweat.

While tumbling, Celica ran. She knelt beside the collapsed Mitsuyoshi, who was not even twitching. She held her hands above his chest.

Falling behind, Ragna also went to Mitsuyoshi's side.

"Mitsuyoshi-san! Please, hang in there!"

Celica's cheeks were stained by dirt and tears while she called him out again and again. Her delicate hands were covered with faint light as she used her healing magic continuously.

Mitsuyoshi's whole body was shredded. His fur was stained with an unpleasant color.

The right side of his face was especially bad. It was dyed with something thick and colored dark red.

On closer look, it was clear that it was caused by a deep wound in his right eye. With his current condition, there wouldn't be light reflected in his right eye anymore.

Celica kept using her magic intensely.

However, it looked like the wounds within his body weren't healing at all. Tears were flowing from Celica's eyes.

"Why... Why...?"

Again and again. But the result was the same. Mitsuyoshi remained motionless.

Even though Ragna stood beside him, he couldn't do anything. He put his hand on the nape of Mitsuyoshi's neck to check his pulse. Yet the pulse rate seemed dreadful.

The overflowing tears from Celica's cheeks gathered at her chin before falling drop by drop.

"Mitsuyoshi-san...!"

"...It's useless."

A cold voice was heard.

Ragna grabbed his sword and put himself on guard. Celica protected the motionless Mitsuyoshi with her back. The two of them turned to the voice.

There shouldn't be anyone else beside the three of them, yet there was someone else within the courtyard. A young child was standing alone beside a tree which was snapped by the mass of shadow.

The age seemed to be less than ten. That child might have been six-years-old.

The child was a young girl with long golden hair tied in two parts. She wore a black dress with a big ribbon that stood out on her chest. There was an elegance on her posture although she was very young. The decaying research facility didn't suit her at all.

"W-What do you mean by useless...?"

Celica asked timidly. There was an intimidating air around the girl which made her hard to oppose. And yet the young girl looked like she would fall down if she was poked.

The girl's cold red eyes gazed at Mitsuyoshi who was behind Celica.

"Those wounds cannot be healed by merely applying healing magic. It's futile no matter how many times you do it."

"That can't be..."

Celica turned to Mitsuyoshi. Enduring too many emotions, her eyes vision blurred.

Glancing at the current Celica, the girl seemed to lose interest and averted her eyes. Next, she looked at Ragna.

"How unsightly."

Against those faint words, Ragna raised the corner of his eye.

"I knew it... You're Rachel, aren't you!?"

Although her appearance was younger, he recognized that brutal phrase since it had struck him countless times. If he could recall things clearly once again, there would be no room for doubt.

But Rachel only looked at Ragna with her cold gaze.

"Don't call me in such familiar manner. It's unpleasant to hear it."

"What did you say...?"

"Do you wish to save that beastkin?"

At little Rachel's interruption, Ragna swallowed back the insults he was about to speak.

"You can save him!?"

"If I couldn't, then I certainly wouldn't have said those words. Am I wrong?"

The girl walked like she was gliding. There was wind with the fragrance of flowers blowing around her. After she seemed to have landed gently, she stood on the opposite side of Ragna and Celica, with Mitsuyoshi in the middle.

As if she was hugging Mitsuyoshi, Celica looked at the small visitor and called out to her.

"If you can save Mitsuyoshi-san, then do it! Please!"

"...How about you?"

Rachel stared at Ragna again.

"Ah? Me?"

"Don’t you wish to save him?"

"Of course I want to. If you really know a way, then hurry up and tell it already!"

He wanted Mitsuyoshi to receive treatment as soon as possible. It made Rachel's composed manner of talking irritate him.

Baring canines that looked almost like beast fangs, Ragna retorted to almost snarling. Rachel slightly frowned. Displeasure went across her big pupils.

"If so, do you not have a more fitting attitude for such request?"

"Tch. Don't make me do annoying things..."

He was mad. But now wasn't the moment for releasing his anger and losing time as the result. It was because he couldn't accurately measure just how severe Mitsuyoshi's condition was.

"...I beg you. Please save Mitsuyoshi."

Humiliation was all over his distorted face as he lowered his head to little Rachel.

Rachel looked at him expressionlessly. Her eyebrows were only a little bit raised. A little while passed.

"Very well. Since you've said that much, I'll bring you along."

Although the appearance was somewhat younger, her annoying personality was indeed the same as the Rachel Alucard he remembered. The upset Ragna grit his teeth, holding himself back from flinging insults.

"But... where will you take us to? And how? The military truck won't be here until evening."

As she wiped her eyes, Celica asked the girl.

Ragna suddenly remembered. He knew where Rachel was going to take them, and her means to do it.

Rachel's face looked disinterested. Without giving a glance to Celica, she took a step forward. From the long sleeve, her pale finger flicked at the air.

"My residence, of course."

The method of transportation lay beneath Rachel's feet. Black lines were running on the degraded ground. With her on the center, a crest of rose was traced. From there, rose colored lights were erected like pillars.

"It can't be... Is this teleportation!?"

Celica shouted in disbelief.

Moving through airspace was what teleportation was. Fixing the coordinates to move to a point was extremely difficult that even her admired sister couldn't master it. Yet the girl before her eyes was doing it without hesitation.

Leaving aside Celica's surprise, the rose colored lights continued preparing for the transition.

As if inviting them, their bodies began to float.

Confused, Celica hugged Mitsuyoshi's body tightly.

While inside the rose colored lights, Ragna stole a glance to Rachel. The existence of that girl had started to unravel his memories one after another.

That was why he started to think. Where was this place? Why did he end up here...?

One second later, Ragna and Celica, as well as Mitsuyoshi, were led by Rachel's magic and vanished from the abandoned research facility.

Chapter 3: Reality's Red

———Log 4

The Takamagahara System. A supreme program humanity has attained. There is a theory that said its development was influenced by the Original Unit.

Once, humanity had tried using it by trying to interfere with the Master Unit.

The Master Unit is located on the other side of the Boundary.

First of all, it's not possible to interfere with it without making contact with the Boundary itself.

What I and Relius are currently constructing is the object needed for that purpose.

The Boundary.

He called it a gate.

The Sheol Gate, that is.

Some say Sheol to be underworld, meaning the realm of the dead.

Our research is progressing smoothly. It's precisely because of it that I keep feeling threatened day by day.

Is it really going to be fine if we make a contact with the Boundary?

Will discovering it be the biggest mistake in human history?

I'm frightened. I'm afraid of it being completed.

I have a feeling that our research will unleash something terrible.

If that time ever comes, then I...

After getting in Rachel's teleportation circle, Ragna and Celica arrived at an old castle that had a majestic feel on it.

The grey stone walls were completely covered with thick ivy. The intimidating gate that was too big for a human to use was both astonishing and eerie at the same time.

For some reason, it was night. Dawn never came here.

A place eternally cloaked by night.

A place that was nowhere.

A place that was connected to everywhere yet could be reached from nowhere.

That was the residence of the Alucard.

Once they arrived, a butler immediately carried Mitsuyoshi inside the castle.

Ragna and Celica followed little Rachel to the parlor and were told to wait there. Both of them sat side by side on a refined antique sofa.

Even though the appearance had a feeling akin to ghosts appearing at any moment, the interior was exceedingly relaxing and elegant. The room was lined up with an immodest amount of ornaments and tasteful furnishings.

Despite all of it, Ragna seemed to be very uncomfortable.

Celica looked nervous as she examined the room. A while ago, the sturdy male butler had brought some teacups. She took one, but immediately put it back on top of a bulky table before even tasting it.

She repeated that motion several times. Then, the parlor's door slowly opened.

"I have to apologize for keeping you waiting, honored guests."

Along with the soft but deep voice of a man, a wheelchaired elderly gentleman entered the room. The room's interiors felt dull as nobility oozed from him.

His hair had become completely white. The severely thin skin was already decaying. But those characteristics only increased his dignity.

The butler who served the black tea from earlier was pushing the wheelchair until the aged man was on the other side of table from Ragna and Celica, facing both of them. Then, he smiled with his deeply wrinkled mouth.

His narrow eyes, which were his only body part not appearing to be declining, were vivid red.

"This is the first time we meet. I am the current head of the Alucard family, Clavis Alucard. This here is the man presently employed as my butler, Valkenhayn."

With his thin hand, Clavis pointed to the man who was standing by behind him. The stern-looking butler introduced as Valkenhayn bowed.

"Valkenhayn..."

Ragna repeated the name he had heard. Ragna recognized that man's name. However, the 'Valkenhayn' before his eyes was a man at his prime, contrast with the 'Valkenhayn' he knew who was an old man.

(...This guy too, huh?)

There was a knowledge of people and others in his memory, but he couldn't accurately picture it. That was the case with Mitsuyoshi, Rachel, and now Valkenhayn.

Clavis continued on as he put his hand on a small figure close to him.

"Moving on... This child's name is Rachel Alucard. She is my daughter."

"Daughter?"

The person who was doubtful was Ragna. Clavis laughed softly.

"Haha. I guess if you looked from a human's perspective, it would have been more acceptable to say that she was my grandchild. Or perhaps, even my great-grandchild?"

"Aah, it's not that. Well, saying her as your daughter at that age sure sounds fishy... No, that's not it. If you're Rachel's parent, are you a vampire then?"

"Kid. Watch your way of talking toward Clavis-sama!"

Hearing Ragna's disrespectful manner of speaking, Valkenhayn, who was behind the aged man, scowled at him with a grim face.

Unafraid, Ragna was ready to talk back. But before he could do it, Clavis raised his hand to soothe and control the situation.

"Indeed. Rachel and I are both vampires. ...A thousand years has passed and made me forget about my age. However, I have witnessed many eras of mankind in those thousand years."

"A thousand years..."

"Do you find it hard to believe, young lady?"

"N-No, it's not like that...! I'm only a bit surprised."

Faced with a graceful smile, Celica suddenly flustered and shook her head.

A vampire who had lived for more than a thousand years. Ragna and Celica couldn't imagine for someone to live for such a long period of time.

"Well then, Sir Ragna and Miss Celica."

Repositioning his fingers, Clavis calmly began to talk.

Ragna and Celica were surprised since Clavis knew their name before they even introduced themselves. But because it was Clavis, it felt like he would know even the secrets of their births unknown to themselves.

"I apologize for suddenly bringing you to this desolate place. Originally, it was Mitsuyoshi alone that was supposed to be brought here... However, it seems my daughter felt uneasy to just leave both of you there and decided to bring you along."

Clavis looked over his daughter with affection. Rachel, the girl who was being talked about, seemed uninterested and turned her face way to another direction.

"Um. Is Mitsuyoshi-san going to be fine?"

Celica leaned forward. She had been waiting to ask it because she was so concerned about him.

"But of course. He is presently receiving medical treatment in the inner section of the castle. His condition was terrible, but there is nothing life threatening. So, please be calm."

"That's great..."

Letting out a big sigh, Celica felt relieved.

Ragna also let out a sigh of relief.

"To survive from a fight against the Black Beast. Beastkins really are tough, aren't they?"

"Aah... Mitsuyoshi seems to misunderstand it too. The black mist that all of you encountered was not the Black Beast."

"Eh?!"

Celica raised her voice in surprise while Clavis calmly continued on despite the situation.

"That was a remnant of Black Beast. Although its purpose is still uncertain, it was left behind at the area where Black Beast manifested and will annihilate anything it sees that comes near. Albeit it is a part of the Black Beast, it is merely a tiny portion of it."

"Then, what actually is the Black Beast...?"

Ragna's face was clouded with unrest as he asked. Uneasiness was also floating on Clavis' eyes.

"Naturally, it is not on the same scale as the black mist from earlier."

It was more powerful, frightening, and irrational.

The fragment of Black Beast that Clavis called a remnant didn't have any arms or legs. Just how much of a fear symbolized the real form of Black Beast, vaguely thought Ragna. On the contrary, he couldn't even imagine on how to stop it.

"Nonetheless, the inside of that remnant was particularly dense. Perhaps it had been concealed there for such a long period of time and accumulated a great number of remains. Even with someone of Mitsuyoshi's caliber, it is not something you would easily defeat."

"...You seem to know Mitsuyoshi very well."

"Aah, that I do."

"Just then, you said you were planning to bring Mitsuyoshi back, right? Does it mean the one who ordered Mitsuyoshi to catch Shuuichirou Ayatsuki was you?"

Celica gasped. Her huge eyes widened on that harsh reality that made her stare at Clavis.

Ragna and Celica. Clavis was showered by both of their gazes, and yet he didn't flinch even a bit as he nodded.

Then, Celica forcefully stood up from the table.

"Why!? Father isn't someone who would do dangerous things! He always does what he considered the best for people!"

"...You are Professor Ayatsuki's daughter, are you not?"

"Y-Yes."

Clavis' voice was soft but dignified. Both of Celica's hands rested on top of her knees, gripped tightly. With nervousness on her face, she straightened herself.

"Perhaps fate has seen it fit that we should meet. Now that it has come to this, I shall tell both of you a story... It is but an old man's tale. It is a bit long, so please have patience in listening to it."

From here on, Clavis moved on to the real issue at hand. Closing his pale eyelids, he took a deep breath. As if reading to them about a legendary story, he began to speak.

"It was a very long, long time ago... In a certain place called Japan, an object called the Susano'o Unit was excavated. It was a mysterious object nobody had ever seen before. Then, mankind wondered if they could find more were they to continue excavating. Everywhere and anywhere, they dug through. Finally, they discovered... the Cauldron."

Deep down below the surface, the gigantic cauldron abruptly opened its mouth.

The inside was filled with red flames dancing around as if it hiding something beneath. When peeking inside, for some reason there was a temptation to be swallowed by it. Those were the rumors circulating around that time in the actual place.

"On the opposite side of the Cauldron, there was something called the Boundary that had spread out. A different dimension from the world humanity lived in, a truly bizarre space. Charmed by great curiosity, mankind proceeded to delve deep to the depths of the Boundary... Deep within, they located something that had a purpose. It was called the Master Unit. ...It was an existence humanity referred to as a god. Humanity then constructed the Takamagahara System to control the Boundary and to try to make a contact with the Master Unit."

"Something like... getting closer with God?"

"No. It was to kill God."

Clavis spoke those dangerous words with a nonchalant and composed manner.

"...Shuuichirou Ayatsuki developed something as a substitute for the Takamagahara System. Something to contact the Boundary, and reach the Master Unit deep within... The Kusanagi."

"Kusanagi..."

Dumbfounded, Celica repeated the word.

That was what her father had been seeking. A tool to reach god. Then, if possible, a weapon that might kill god.

"Why would Father create such a thing...?"

"Well, now. I myself do not know the reason. For humanity to once develop the Takamagahara System and attempt to kill God at the same time... It perhaps might have been something to do out of curiosity. However, I deemed that experiment to be dangerous. Therefore, in order to prevent it, I dispatched Mitsuyoshi to recover the prime field... But it seemed I was too late. He had already completed it and performed the test experimentation as well."

Clavis shut his mouth for a moment. It was only for a brief amount of time, but it was enough for Ragna to guess what happened next.

"...And then, the Black Beast appeared, right?"

"Exactly. The Black Beast was born from the Cauldron that was discovered in the same place as the Susano'o Unit. That place, too, was where they conducted the test experiment."

Shuuichirou Ayatsuki had made contact with the Boundary, and from the Boundary the Black Beast came. If it was only based on that fact, it was possible to say that his experiment had unleashed the Black Beast.

Celica hung her head. Her long hair weakly slipped from the nape of her neck to her chest. The hands on her knees clenched tightly.

"Is my father... still alive?"

"I do not know. It has only been a few days since we have learned the truth that his experiment was conducted in the same place where the Black Beast had appeared, as well as the same time. But if we could hear the details of the story from Shuuichirou Ayatsuki himself, we might be able to get hold of clues regarding the Black Beast."

Having spoken that far, Clavis sunk his frail body into the wheelchair. Fatigue ran across him as he exhaled a deep, long breath.

A vampire that could age and also become tired. Ragna got an interest to that unusual notion.

"...The Black Beast. It is a monster born from the Boundary... no, it is the Boundary itself. It is not something a man should associate with. Humanity is still immature. Although their immaturity was the reason for their curiosity, a contact with the Boundary must not happen."

Feeling gloomy as if he was reciting a poem of folklore, Clavis' voice was filled with weariness as he spoke.

"Before long, it seems humanity will shift to the next 'phase'. However, this is not the 'destruction' that was needed for that purpose. It is simply a 'massacre'. ...The Black Beast cannot be ignored. Otherwise..."

"...We will undoubtedly meet our demise."

With Clavis' statement, an uncomfortable feeling somehow struck Ragna deep within his mind.

Within that instant, Ragna himself was incapable to understand what it was. What he understood was... even though Clavis and Rachel were both vampires, something in their fundamental parts made them feel like two different entities.

More than that trivial uneasiness, Ragna now felt the weight of Clavis' prediction. The truth, which was borne from his soft tone of conveying that story, felt as cold as ice.

It was as if Clavis could see the fragments of humanity's future downfall.

"After Mitsuyoshi has recovered, I once again will request him to seek Shuuichirou Ayatsuki. I will leave what both of you will do to your own judgment. However..."

As if dispersing the tension, Clavis smiled gently.

"Before that time comes, please take comfort and rest yourselves here. It has been only a short while after your encounter with the remnant of Black Beast. Even if you haven't noticed it yet, I am sure that some fatigues must have accumulated within. Valkenhayn will prepare the rooms, so until then, ease yourselves in this room."

After saying it as if he was facing a relative's children, Clavis left the parlor with Valkenhayn and Rachel following him.

Before long, Valkenhayn returned to the room although not much time had passed. He guided Ragna and Celica to the guest rooms on the second floor of the mansion.

Although Mitsuyoshi's injuries were not as serious as they had expected, there wasn't any reason for them to leave this place in a hurry.

As the fatigues they were shouldering finally caught up with them, Ragna and Celica took upon the appreciated generosity from Clavis.

For some reason, the vast ground where Clavis' castle was located in was confined in night. There were thick clouds hanging on the dark sky. From their crevices, the circular moon with its silver surface was peeking through.

Instead of obediently lying down on the elegant bed inside the guest room, which was given to rest in, Ragna decided to stroll around the garden that was encircling the castle.

While he was walking, he compared the visible sceneries with the ones within his memory that was steadily getting clearer.

Ragna had been brought to the residence of Alucard by Rachel for countless times. But what he had seen at those times wasn't an eerie old castle with jutting spires, but rather a more magnificent castle with overflowing elegance.

The surroundings were comprised of a garden with roses in full bloom. Now, it was only an untrimmed and ivy infested mess of a neglected garden.

The feeling, as if the atmosphere was detached from time, was identical. Still, what was actually visible was different.

It wasn't only the structure and garden. The Rachel whom Ragna knew was slightly more mature. Valkenhayn wasn't a man at this prime, but rather an old man with a white beard.

And within Rachel's castle, a person named Clavis didn't exist.

If there was something to consider...

"Hey, Rabbit!"

Cutting off his thought midway, Ragna recklessly walked toward a small figure that was standing within the neglected garden.

Resembling rabbit's ears, her straightened black ribbons swayed around. Rachel, who was younger than what Ragna remembered, turned around slightly.

"...Who do you think you are? Why is it that you have to keep referring me as a mere rabbit every time you address me?"

Feeling very unpleasant, Rachel spoke in her young voice.

With a scorn look, she stared at Ragna. But he just burst out laughing.

"Heh. Even if you look more like a brat now, that irritating way you talk is the same as usual. It makes me feel relieved though."

"You're truly presumptuous. What an eyesore."

"Whoa. Where are you going?"

Her twin tails fluttering as she turned to leave, but Ragna grabbed her shoulder.

"I have a ton of things you need to hear."

"I don't feel the need to listen to your story."

"Just hear me out. I don't understand what the hell's going on here anymore!"

Although he raised his voice, there wasn't much strength in his tone. To be frank, Ragna was relying on her.

Rachel Alucard. There was no mistaking her name.

When he came to, his right arm and right eye couldn't work. In the world that he felt out of place, she was the first person he met who also previously existed in his memory.

"What's going on with me? Where is this? What the hell's happening!? If it's you, then you should know the answer, right!?"

"...Unhand me."

"Then answer. I'll let you go if you do."

"Unhand me at once, you insolent man!"

Along with her angry voice, a flash of lightning came from the sky. It hit Ragna's hand that had been grabbing Rachel's shoulder.

"Guh...!"

Sparks scattered. Ragna was repelled and immediately his back hit the hedge behind him. The withered hard branches, which were as if time had halted for it, pierced Ragna's body much like needles.

"That hurts... The hell do you think you're doing!?"

"That is my line."

Ragna brushed several twigs as he raised his body. Meanwhile, Rachel pierced him with her cold gaze.

"From the very beginning, you have been acting overly familiar with me despite it being our first meeting. I will speak nothing more to a savage like yourself who doesn't even have the slightest bit of manners. Associating myself with the likes of you will only serve to lower my dignity."

Rachel's words flowed like a song as she criticized Ragna. However, those harsh words and mocking glance mattered little to Ragna for now. There was something else that caught his attention.

"Hey... First meeting? Whose with who?"

His voice became stiff.

Rachel's face grown more and more sullen.

"Have your ears rotted away? Obviously yours and mine, lowlife."

Those words were casually spoken from the childish voice, yet it struck directly to Ragna's brain. It was really shocking for him.

"Hey. Your joke's gone too far. Aren't you Rachel Alucard?"

If Rachel didn't know him, who else would Ragna seek assurance from? Ragna held his head that was starting to get dizzy.

Immediately, he began to think that he wasn't an entity that should have existed in this world.

"How about if you continue to tell what you have in mind with me instead, young man?"

Between the grimacing Rachel and bewildered Ragna, a composed voice cut between them.

Ragna and Rachel turned to voice at the same time.

Operating the wheelchair by his own hands, Clavis slowly manuevered toward them. Clavis' presence within the ivy-infested abandoned garden made him look just like that of a ghost. Behind him, his shadow seemed to become more distinct.

"Rachel. I want to have a talk with this young man for a little while. Are you fine with it?"

"...But of course, dear Father."

Rachel slightly picked up the hem of her lengthy dress and gave her old father a well-mannered bow. She then lightly poked the ground with her shoes. Slightly, her tiptoes floated from the ground, and then she left the place by riding the night wind.

As she left, Rachel took a glance at Ragna. She didn't feel a slightest bit of familiarity toward him. However, he seemed to be confused as if he were searching for something, based on his appearance.

"You appear to have known Rachel, have you not?"

Looking at Ragna watch the little figure that was leaving, Clavis expressed a smile as he spoke.

Ragna roughly scratched his head.

"Yeah. But the Rachel I know looks a little older than this."

"Ohh. So you have the privilege of knowing what kind of lady she will grow up to be. I cannot help but feel a little jealous."

Since it was spoken as if it were a common everyday conversation, Ragna almost overlooked what he said.

There was some particular hidden meaning in Clavis' words. The present Rachel would grow to be the Rachel he knew.

The smile in Clavis' eyes changed as they narrowed. His red eyes were filled with concern. Within their depths, there were wisdoms that Ragna hadn't known.

"Sir Ragna. Have all of your memories returned yet?"

"How do you...?"

Ragna stopped mid-sentence. He hadn't known about the man named Clavis Alucard that well. But he was certain that this old vampire knew just about everything.

On the other hand, the Rachel whom Ragna knew was also knowledgeable in everything. But she always kept them to herself.

"Not yet. Not all of them... I think."

Ragna massaged his temple roughly with his fingers while giving his straight answer. He could feel a dull pain coming from the inside of his head.

"Hey, mister. If you know what's going on, then tell me. The more I remember, the more confusing things get. Is this the world I know? Enough of this, my head's getting all weird."

Unknown common knowledge, unknown cities, unknown incidents. The world where the Black Beast appeared six years ago.

"Mm," said Clavis as he crossed his fingers on top of his knees.

"Then, I shall ask you the most recent of those memories you have recovered... Can you tell me what year this is?"

"...2199 AD. Nah, we just had a new year so it should be 2200 AD."

"This is presently the year of 2106 AD, young man."

"....."

Ragna fell silent. Clavis continued talking.

"You are starting to realize it, are you not? This place... Or rather, this period is ninety-four years prior to the period you had lived in. In other words, you are currently existing in the past."

He calmly accepted those words which had been stabbed at him. His confused mind tried to comprehend it, but it surprisingly didn't take too long.

Ragna suspected something based on what Clavis had said. But he deemed it too dumb to be true.

It was probably because of his disordered memories. That should be impossible. He couldn't have just ended up back in ninety-four years in the past, when humanity fought for their lives against the Black Beast in an era called the Dark War.

"...Even I do not have the answer regarding why you arrived to this time and age. Likewise, I do not know any means to send you back to your time."

Clavis looked up at the silver moon in the sky. His figure felt strangely faint. It was as if he would just melt and disappear within the weak moonlight that was pouring from the rifts between the clouds.

Vampires lived a long life, but none had immortality. Perhaps there was only a little left of life for Clavis. Ninety-nine years to come, he would not exist in the Alucard residence. Ragna made that guess while he stared at the pale and elderly vampire's profile.

"However, young man. Romantically speaking, perhaps your arrival to this period is not a cruel coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"There are duties that you have to accomplish in this era, guided by fate. And thus, since your deeds will be required from one place to the next, your line of path will someday become a giant circle... "

With a tone that sounded more like he was telling a prophecy, Clavis looked somewhat happy.

Since he felt uneasy of being treated like a child, even though he wasn't one anymore, Ragna had a sullen face.

"If that's what you think, shouldn't you explain whatever those tasks are, in case it becomes true? It'll make things go easier."

"I do not know anything of it. I am but a powerless old man, and can do nothing but observe from this place."

Clavis stretched his pale fingers into the shrubbery which was similar like a labyrinth. There was an ivy creeping from within the foliage. His bloodless fingertips traced its leaves.

"Much like this castle, I am ensnared by the ivy. I can no longer move from here. The one who can act is not me, but the living mankind."

Ragna couldn't think of any reply, so he kept silent. He knew what Clavis meant. But he had thought if mankind, including himself, could do what Clavis had expected, even though it was pretty vague.

"I wanna ask something."

"Very well, if it is within my capability."

Ragna was bewildered by Clavis' calm manner. The vampires that Ragna had in mind had a much harsher image stuck to them.

Unable to make up his mind which of the two attitudes were better, Ragna fixed his eyes on the old gentleman sitting on the wheelchair as if observing him.

"Looking at you and hearing your words, it seems you’re extremely supportive toward mankind. You've done things like trying to stop the experiment of Celica's old man, and then searching for him to get info about the Black Beast. And you don't even get any benefit from doing all that."

Instead the actions were aimed for the better of mankind. He couldn't help thinking that.

"Mister, are you a protector of mankind?"

"...Protector? I cannot even imagine performing something so outrageous."

Quietly, Clavis' muttering was mixed with a sigh. Like the ivy, his voice was melting away silently into the darkness. But having never completely disappeared, a meager strength crept back to his voice.

"I do not wish for the apocalypse. Humans do what human does. Beasts do what beast does. Fishes do what fish does. If I am able to give a slight assistance so that they are able to survive, then I will do so."

Clavis slid his fingers away from the ivy smoothly. He put those hands on the wheels of his wheelchair before heavily pulling himself away from the thick shrubbery.

"I grow tired. I apologize that I have to end this long conversation here. I have to return to the mansion soon."

"...Yeah. Don't overdo it, Gramps."

"Hahaha. To think that I would see the day when a human lad would worry for my well-being. It seems I have lived quite a long life."

Clavis' shoulders jolted as if it were the happiest laughter he had let out all day. Then as if gliding, Clavis operated his wheelchair. He headed toward a pathway within the neglected garden that was overrun with weeds. While on his route, he casually looked back at Ragna.

"Young man. Live true to your heart. If you have done at least that much, the path you should take shall be clear."

Even when they are already a distance apart, he could hear Clavis' voice clearly.

The wheelchair started to move again. Clavis returned back to the eerie castle that stood still amidst the night sky.

Ragna didn't move from that spot. Since Clavis didn't necessarily need any kind of aid, he felt unnecessary to chase after him now and help push the wheelchair.

He reflected on something while staring at the faint scenery of the departing Clavis.

"True to my heart, huh? Even if you say that..." he thought.

However, something else suddenly came to his mind.

Ninety-four years ago. Right in the middle of the Dark War. According to Ragna's vague memories of history, the Black Beast would be defeated in a few years.

By the hands of six heroic people.

In that case, the Six Heroes should be somewhere within the earth during this period. His master who taught him how to wield sword, Jubei. Hakumen. Nine. Valkenhayn. Another one whose name wasn't recorded in the formal history.

And then, Yuuki Terumi.

If he were able to find the one who was related to Black Beast's appearance, Shuuichirou Ayatsuki, he might get his hands on information regarding Terumi.

If it was Terumi, then it was possible that he could recognize Ragna. Ragna might also able to search for a way to return to his own time. If things went well, maybe even kill that bastard...

Before he knew it, his right hand clenched tightly.

"Hm...? It's moving?"

Until now, he could only twitch his right hand's fingers. He couldn't feel any sensation to it, but just now, it was able to move up until the wrist.

(Is it... healing?)

Now that his right hand could move, he would be able to fight more decently. It seemed the situation had changed for the better, even if it was only a little.

Ragna clenched his right hand once more before taking a huge step toward the eerie castle.

Returning to the old castle, Ragna walked along the silent yet peaceful hallway. He then stopped on front of a door with an old-fashioned knob.

The candlesticks illuminating the hallway were equally spaced. It gave off a whimsical feel of a dream, but also the same uncanny atmosphere. The lights from flames which never seemed to fade were flickering. Their movements were indications that Ragna was there. The flickers caused many folds of shadows squirming within the surroundings.

It was very eerie. Feeling a chill on his back, Ragna turned to face the door. Hesitating a bit, he pounded the door.

Immediately, there were sounds like someone was moving around the room. Then, he could hear some light footsteps approaching him.

The guest room actually had a lock attached on the door, but the room's occupant didn't seem to lock it. Without any caution, the door was thrown open. Celica appeared from the inside.

"Ah, Ragna. What's the matter?"

"Nah, nothing's going on... Say, you're surprisingly normal, aren't you?"

Ragna muttered with anticlimactic tone. As the result, Celica pouted in dissatisfaction.

"Hey, what do you mean by surprisingly normal? Sure, mine isn't as big as Onee-chan's, but the most important thing is balance. Besides, I'm not sure if guys get it, but bigger isn't always better, you know?"

"Wait, wait, wait. What are you talking about?"

The talk was going off to an odd direction. Ragna was troubled by her suggestive response.

"Since a lot things have happened, I thought you might be depressed or something. And so, I came to check. But you just acted like nothing happened. That's why I said 'normal'."

Inside her father's completely changed workplace, they encountered a remnant of the Black Beast. The uncertainty of whether her father was still alive, as well as the story they had heard from Clavis. What the girl in her mid-teens experienced all at once should be a little depressing.

Celica blinked in surprise for several times while she looked at Ragna. Then the corner of her eyes wrinkled as she smiled.

"So you're worried about me."

"...It's nothing like that."

"There you go again. It's good to not be shy about it. I already know Ragna is a kind person."

She said it with an unconcerned expression that had made him unable to respond. Ragna's face grew sour as he averted his eyes.

"You want to get in? Come in," said Celica as she took a step back into the room. Ragna looked inside the identical borrowed room from the opposite side. It was a first-class interior everywhere his eye could see.

Ragna truly wondered what kind of guest would come to this secluded place.

"Nah, I'll come back soon."

"Is that so?"

"Besides, don't just let guys come into your room so easily."

Even though this wasn't the first time, Ragna was still amazed at Celica's carelessness.

Ragna sighed. Like a child, Celica looked at him mischievously.

"Are you going to do something to me?"

"LIKE HELL I AM!!"

"Ahaha, I know."

Hearing on Celicia's refreshing laugh, Ragna felt like his whole strength had left his body. His shoulders slumped.

...Simultaneously, all uneasiness within him faded away as well.

He was envious on the girl's way to laugh.

"...Hey."

"What is it, Ragna?"

"About your old man... What are you going to do?"

Ragna asked while looking straight into Celica's eyes. Her eyes' color was the color of soil after getting drenched by rain. Ragna didn't have the slightest idea of what kind of face that was reflected on those eyes.

"I'm going to find him."

"Even after hearing that talk?"

It's not like they just casually doubted Mitsuyoshi's words, but Clavis was a lot more convincing when he told the story once more.

Shuuichirou Ayatsuki was related to the appearance of the Black Beast. That much was clear.

Even so, Celica nodded while smiling.

"Of course. It's for that very reason that I've come this far. No matter what he did, Father is still my father. It's not to make sure what the truth actually is, but it's because I'm worried about him."

"If you do find him, won't he become a public enemy?"

"I'm still going to find him."

There wasn't a single hesitation within Celica.

Ragna was taken aback by the immediate reply.

"If he did something bad, then he will have to apologize. If he didn't, then he will have to give an explanation. After Father tells everything he knows, everyone will use it as a foundation and then think of a way to deal with the Black Beast."

"It won't be that smooth."

"Then I'll do my best to keep it as smooth as possible!"

Celica grasped both of hands tightly with a jerk to her chest.

"I trust my father. I have faith in him since he's my father. Although everyone said bad things about Father, I'll still say I love him even when I'm alone."

His chest felt heavy. Ragna didn't know the cause as he grit his teeth.

Celica's eyes looked warm as she stared at Ragna. Ragna unconsciously hoped within his heart that sorrow would never stained those warm eyes.

"And besides, anyone is able to do their best. If people around the world really do their best together, surely the world will become a beautiful place. ...And the Black Beast will be defeated, too."

It was not a wish, but rather a belief.

He felt Celica was naïve since she declared it without any basis whatsoever. But he didn't dislike that naïvety.

Ragna raised the edge of his lips and smiled.

"If you've decided that you'll search for your old man, then that's fine. I'll keep on accompanying you. I want to meet your old man, too."

"Then we'll be going together again! Yay!"

Celica clapped both of her hands while her hair was swaying around since she was excited. Feeling that she would jump at him anytime, Ragna took a step back.

Just as he expected, she recklessly swung her hands in the air. Amused by her action, Ragna burst out laughing while placing his hand on Celica's head.

"You're not some kind of kid that's getting excited for a trip. Go to sleep already."

"Okaaay."

Celica replied obediently as her eyes squinted in delight. Ragna playfully gave a satisfactory nod.

He took his hand from Celica and turned around.

"See ya."

"Ah, Ragna!"

Facing Ragna's back, Celica jumped out into the hallway and shouted.

"Thanks for worrying about me. Let's do our best together!"

"Yeah, yeah."

While waving his hand over his shoulder, Ragna entered the neighboring guest room.

His uneasiness had eased. Rather unsightly, Ragna removed his sword from his waist and collapsed onto the sofa at the same time. There was a bed in the room, but he couldn't sleep well on such a soft place with that kind of surface.

He had planned to cheer her up, but he had been cheered up instead.

He was strangely getting used to being affected by Celica's smiling face.

He didn't give a thought about his memory or his original time, but it was much simpler. He felt that he wanted to become her strength.

But there was no way to be sure that if it was a good or a bad thing.

As he brushed away the hair that was bothering him, Ragna suddenly noticed something.

His right hand, which was able to move slightly while he was in the abandoned garden earlier, couldn't be moved again. He was sure that his hand had been able to clench before, but now even his little finger couldn't move.

"Tch... The hell's with it? It went back to before it's moving."

Even if he cursed it, it still couldn't be moved.

Ragna let out a huge sigh over his numerous thoughts toward Celica, as well as his acceptance for the right arm's condition. But for the time being, he just wanted to sleep.

It was the next day after they had spent a night in the Alucard's residence.

Ragna and Celica arrived in Japan for the second time.

The sky was clear and devoid of any clouds. Its blue color was covered in murkiness, much like diluted ink that was stretched faraway.

But it didn't feel pleasant there. The sky was dead silent as there wasn't even a tiny bit of breeze there. Coupled with the warm temperature that didn't belong under any season, it felt absolutely unpleasant.

Noon should have ended sometime soon.

Via magic, they had arrived in Japan during morning from the Alucard residence, which was always enclosed by night. Their heads and bodies were unable to cope with the sudden change of environment. They had been feeling a bit out of place.

How long had they walked?

They had departed from a small abandoned city within the Kantou region of Japan after being dropped off there. Now, within the landscape of rough mountain trails, Ragna was starting to feel the depth of despair for the first time.

Ragna realized how bitter regret tasted. He should have expected things would go like this. Having said that, Ragna resented himself for carelessly believing Celica's words.

It'll be fine this time.

She said it while brimming with confidence as they were about to depart from the Alucard residence, all while firmly holding the map they had received from Clavis.

"Celica."

Ragna, stopping in the middle of the mountain, called out to the back of the girl who was walking in front of him.

Even though they were in a mountain, there were no green trees around. It was as if someone had chopped them off, leaving the brown soils exposed.

Celica also halted and turned back to face Ragna. Ragna then put his left hand on the unreliable person's shoulder.

"Give up."

"You see, I think it's not good to jump at conclusion so fast. No matter what happens, we should keep our calm and..."

"Then calmly look at the outcome you've brought us to. Just accept it, and give up."

Ragna stared at Celica with a really unpleasant look on his face as he put more strength to grip her shoulder. She wouldn't understand if he wasn't saying it directly. He decided to speak more clearly.

"We're on the wrong way. We're lost. We're heading nowhere."

"We're not lost. We just don't know where we are on the map."

"Like. I. Said. That's exactly what lost is! Aaah, shit. I really shouldn't have left it to you..."

Déjà vu hit Ragna as he recalled the first time he met Celica. At that time, he felt the same kind of regret as well.

Celica seemed to feel a bit responsible. Once again, she stared hard at the map on her hands. Her lips thinned in confusion.

"That's funny. I'm sure we're following the path in this map."

"If you're really following the map, then you should know where we are."

The map that was entrusted by Clavis showed the vicinity of an area currently known as the 'First District'.

The First District was the land where it all began. Once, the Susano'o Unit and the Cauldron were excavated there. Eventually, it became the place where the Black Beast had first appeared. It was Ragna and Celica's destination this time.

Originally, Mitsuyoshi was supposed to visit Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's workplace that was called as the leading sampling research laboratory in the west.

But once that became nonviable, Clavis gave Celica the map so that she might be able to gather clues about Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's whereabouts.

As a courtesy, he even gave directions on how to go to the location. But he seemed to underestimate Celica's ability to get lost.

It was already impossible to get back on the right track since they didn't even know where their current location was.

Mitsuyoshi was the one who excelled at this kind of stuff. But although he had regained consciousness, he still couldn't move. Because of it, he was ordered to recuperate in Clavis' castle.

"For now, give me the map! Nothing good will come out when you hold it!"

Ragna stretched his arm to forcibly snatch the map from Celica's hand. In response, Celica twisted her body with all her might to avoid him.

"Wah! Please! Please let me have it! Let me try again! I have a feeling that we're getting close this time!"

"No way in hell! Just give the map to..."

At that moment, a sharp noise cut through the air.

Simultaneously, he sensed a killing intent.

Ragna immediately pushed Celica down and dived to the ground. He embraced Celica close to his chest to protect her from the ground.

One moment later, something hit the ground behind Ragna. A low roaring sound gouged deep exactly in the place where Ragna had stood and blew away the dry soils.

"Wha...!?"

It had happened all of a sudden. As rain of dusts and pebbles showered his back, Ragna panicked and looked down at Celica who was lying on the hard ground.

"Hey! You okay!?"

"I-I'm fine...!"

Celica gave a small nod.

Ragna's position looked like he was holding down Celica to the ground. However, it wasn't the time to be concerned about that.

Something unknown had attacked. Perhaps it could be a remnant of the Black Beast again.

Anticipating for another attack, Ragna stood up. As Celica was getting up too, her face froze up.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

When he looked closer, Celica's face had gone pale.

It looked like she saw something. Ragna took the sword from his waist while slowly turning around, putting himself on guard.

"...Hm?"

As he turned around, Ragna's face warped to a different complexion than Celica's.

With no wind to carry it anywhere, the cloud of dusts on the hollowed ground slowly dissipated.

What appeared on the opposite side were two human figures. They didn't appear to be bandits who attacked people that were passing by, much less A remnant of the Black Beast.

It was two women.

The first one was a beautiful woman with tall, slender figure. Her long hair magnificently flowed down her back. Supple, long legs stretched from the tight skirt. Those legs could attract any person's eyes to them. A long mantle hung from her shoulders, while a pointy triangular hat was on top of her head. It was like an attire of a witch coming from some fairy tale.

The other person was a bit more petite and wore big glasses. She was walking slightly behind the other one, which made her seem to be accompanying the woman in the pointy hat. Her gestures were truly sophisticated. She wore a big hood, which was attached to her robe, on her head, making her look like a witch as well.

"Ah... O..."

As if strength had left her body, Celica fell, sitting down. She couldn't take her eyes off from the two figures that were approaching slowly. Rather than frightened, she was more of being extremely surprised.

"Someone you know?"

Ragna hastily asked a question toward Celica who was behind him as he examined the approaching woman in the pointy hat. She was truly a lovely lady.

Despite her beautiful appearance, the air she gave off was unexpectedly intimidating. It made all of his nerves tensed up. To put it bluntly, it was truly terrifying.

Celica spoke in a trembling voice.

"O... Onee-chan."

"Huh!?"

Ragna spontaneously looked back toward Celica and let out a disarrayed voice as if asking her again.

At that moment, the killing intent that had been rising up until now started to move.

Shit! Danger signals filled Ragna's mind. He turned his disordered head back to the front as if twisting it.

What had jumped in his vision when he turned was a tight skirt which emphasized the alluring bodyline and a firm thigh that were extending from the skirt.

The leg bent like a whip. It struck Ragna's head with a perfectly done spinning kick like it was drawing something on canvas.

Chapter 4: Chance-met Silver

———Log 5

Completed.

The dangerous object that was being sought by Relius and the snake-like man has been completed.

However, I too, have taken interest toward it.

I am a researcher, after all.

That is why I developed this.

This is a *lynchpin*.

If they intend to create a blade to sever the entrance to the Boundary, then this will be the nail to shut it close.

They are oblivious to the fact that I have made it. They still shouldn't be aware of it later on.

Nothing but Kusanagi is reflected in their eyes.

Next, if I can get my hands on the key, this lynchpin will be truly complete.

Key... My key.

Until that has been properly raised to accomplish the role of a key, it will be nice if nothing happens.

It seemed the hard tiptoe of the high heel was carefully aimed at Ragna's temporal region before hitting it.

"GUAAHH!?"

Much like a bouncing spring, Ragna's body flew. The sounds of his jacket scraping the ground could be heard when he rolled over the rough ground.

"That... hurts! The hell are you doing all of a..."

Ragna strongly held down the part that was kicked as he yelled. But that voice quickly faded away.

When Ragna raised his face up, the woman with pointy hat who had gifted him a roundhouse kick was now raising both of her hands while glaring at him.

There was yellow light on her hands that was scattering like sparks. Crackling sounds started to swirl.

Judging from her gaze, the one she aimed the offensive magic to... couldn't be anyone else.

"H-Hey, stop it! First, calm down and tell me your reason!"

"Reason? You mean there's any other reason than wanting to erase you...?"

"H-Huh? What are you sa..."

"If you fail to comprehend it, then I'll beat that body of yours to my heart's content... Your crime for just casually deceiving my sister... Don't you think you can leave unscathed. Now, you shall regret that you were born!"

Simultaneously with that declaration, the mass of sparks flung while aiming at Ragna.

"WHOA!?"

Ragna jumped backward and tried to decrease the light orb's force by stopping it with his sword. Before his eyes, the sparks from the brutal force were dancing around while scattering.

Groaning, he forcibly knocked off the light orb to the wasteland. But the recoil blew away Ragna again.

The tall figure bounced on the hard ground's surface for two, three times.

"Ragna! Look out!"

Before he could even comprehend what happened to his body, he heard Celica's word of warning. He shifted his body by rolling sideways, only by pure reflexes.

This time, what aimed the spot where Ragna had landed was a downpour of sharp rocks.

If Celica didn't warn him, perhaps his body would be full of holes in the place where he was at several seconds earlier.

Using the momentum from his roll, Ragna sprung and got up. This time, lances of flame launched in a straight line, aimed at his face.

"You kidding me!?"

Even being unforgiving still had its limit. For the first fire lance attack, he twisted his body to the point that it barely grazed him, so he somewhat dodged that one. But the woman was aiming that very moment and suddenly made Ragna's feet frozen, robbing him of his movement.

Crap. When he was quickly confirming his fleeting thought of that single word, an invisible shockwave sunk into Ragna's abdomen.

"U... ugh..."

The contents of his stomach welled up from within his body.

One second later, he experienced a sensation as if the whole of his bodily functions had been stopped. No more strength came out of his hand. It made the large sword fell as if spilled from his hand, before it stuck on the ground.

Sounds of cracking ice could be heard from his feet. In a moment, his feet were released from the binding. Ragna dropped to his knees.

"Cough, cough... Guh... Hurk..."

With his trembling back in addition to his coughing, Ragna raised his head. The witch with the pointy hat, who had been attacking him with her barrage of attacks, was walking closer. The sounds of footstep originating from her hard high heels could be heard faintly.

She stopped before Ragna's eyes. Slowly, she raised her foot... and swung down the heel to the top of Ragna's head with all her might.

"Buh!"

Ragna plummeted into the ground.

"Hmph. I was wondering how strong the person who wields that grandiose sword would be... But you're just small fry. It's utter nonsense for you to cut apart the magical power of this supreme me."

"You... bitch..."

As Ranga lifted his enraged head up, the witch mercilessly trampled down his body. It was very much like pinning down a dog to discipline it.

"Consider this an honor. After all, I will personally hand down judgment for a worthless man like you."

The witch's raised her palm upward with such a graceful movement. On her palm, a fireball as big as a man's head ignited. The impression of the light on her overlooking eyes made it seem she was beyond reasoning.

Cold sweat ran down Ragna's forehead.

"S...Stop, stop it! Let's, uh, try to collect ourselves again. I think we should understand each other with more composure, more logic, and mooooore carefully!"

Ragna was desperately trying to negotiate, but the witch just stared at him with surprisingly calm eyes. Her vivid lips spoke few words as if engraving them to him.

"Enough talk."

Creating a rumbling sound, the flame on the witch's hand blazed.

Aah, magic flame is definitely hot. Ragna absentmindedly thought about it while the situation hadn't changed for the better.

At that moment, Celica jumped from the side and held back the arm of the witch that was about to throw the flame toward Ragna's face at any moment.

"Quit it, Onee-chan! Ragna isn't a bad person!"

Toward the complaint from the displeased and red-faced Celica, the witch quickly dismissed it with a harsh tone of voice while holding the flame still.

"Please be silent, Celica. This is you we're talking about. Without knowing this man that well, just because you get along a bit, you decided that he's a kind person and can be trusted, am I right?'

"It's not like that! Ragna is truly a kind person!"

"Don't you always consider everyone related with you a kind person?"

Then, the witch intensely stared at her. Knowing what it meant all too well, Celica was at a loss for words.

"Good grief. It's because of you saying foolish things like searching for that man that this guy passing by can easily trick you."

The witch brushed away the long hair on her shoulders and annoyingly turned to face Ragna.

"Okay? This is a good time, so remember well. Since you're an obedient, simple, and cute child, you'll get approached more easily by men with disgusting ulterior motives. This man is no different. Quickly exterminating this pest is doing a favor to society."

"You... What do you mean by pest?"

Whatever the circumstance might be, she had said too much. Ragna raised his voice in discontent. With a look like she was about to shoot him, the witch turned to Ragna.

"Do you have a complaint? You're not any different than an insect."

"You bitch. I won't stay quiet and let you say whatever you like to me. It's too far, even for a joke."

Having been trampled down until now, Ragna got quite pissed off and shook off the witch's feet that had been holding down his shoulder.

"What's wrong with you? Listen to other people's stories even for a bit! First of all, I'm not deceiving Celica! I'm in her debt since she saved me when I was unconscious. I went through so much that I ended up only wanting to help find her old man!"

If he was just hated, then it's fine. But he couldn't accept being called a pest. Moreover, it's unthinkable to just dismiss Celica's feelings when she was concerned about her father.

"...Besides, you don't have to speak that harsh to Celica. You seem to disapprove of her searching for her old man, but he has been missing for six years. Think about it for a sec. If you consider Celica's feelings, don't you think that 'foolish thing' you said is a bit heartless?"

Celica knew she was being reckless by disobeying her sister and rushed from her home. It was easy to just declare that she was being reckless. But it wasn't easy for Celica's feelings to leave her home at that time.

"...You talk like you know everything."

Then, the eyes of Celica's older sister narrowed.

In an instant, Ragna felt a chill ran down his spine. It seemed that he had just stepped on a switch that shouldn't have been disturbed.

And that was definitely not his imagination. Although a magician, the beautiful woman was pretty direct with her violence. Her visibly remaining composure had been cast aside. Her rage was laid bare when she raised her voice.

"No. One. Asked. For. Your. Opinion!"

Her hand formed a fist, crushing the fireball she had specially created. The witch's high heel kicked Ragna in a regular rhythm.

"Ugh. Guh...!"

"In the first place, you're just a man passing by. Don't talk like you're already familiar with Celica! Your filthy hand feels sticky and it disgusts me. You trash! Garbage!"

The tip of her high heel grinded against Ragna's forehead. The intensity of her expression gave form to an emotion called hatred.

"Onee-chan, stop it already!"

Holding some irritation, Celica's voice got hoarse and tearful. It agitated even more of the witch's anger. Celica's sorrowful face. Celica pleading for Ragna. It was as if all of it was Ragna's fault.

She put more strength to the foot that was crushing him. At that moment.

"Okay, okaaaaay. For now, shouldn't we take a break somewhere nearby~?"

Until then, she had been a bit separated from them as she continued to watch the arguing. The woman who wore a hood and big glasses had already closed in before anyone noticed it.

With a gentle voice as soft as marshmallows, she forced herself between Ragna and the witch with the pointy hat.

"Everyone, let's have some warm tea to drink. Alright?"

With a dumbfoundingly carefree tone, the glasses woman smiled cheerfully toward Ragna and Celica's older sister.

A short while afterward.

"...I get it already, Trinity."

In a completely reluctant manner, the witch with the pointy hat finally released her foot from Ragna.

They were not far from the First District... or they should be. On a desolate mountain trail with no vegetation growing, Ragna, devoid of energy to stand up anymore, sat down with his back placed against a big rock.

Even though his body was grazed many times against magic effects and received a shock wave to his stomach, the damage received from the continuous kicking was the most severe.

He rubbed his hurting forehead while he watched what was on the other side. There were Celica and seemingly her sister of a witch with the pointy hat. They were both quarreling and sometimes even shouting.

It was hard to say that the atmosphere was gentle. But he judged that there wasn't a tiny speck of anything serious that couldn't be mended. They seemed to be close sisters.

Ragna was at loss on how many times he had sighed. He had been completely out of the loop from some time ago.

"Here you go."

A gentle voice approached him from his side. It was the woman with glasses holding out a small plastic cup. Its contents was herb tea, which she blended herself. Thin white vapor was rising.

He wasn't particularly appropriate with the likes of herb tea, but Ragna was thankful to receive it. There was an unusually refreshing aroma there.

Although there was no water around the wasteland, it didn't really make the spectacled woman concerned in getting hot water since she had magic. He didn't have anything against magic, but even when he knew that it was harmless to drink it, he still had complicated feelings about it.

The spectacled woman sat beside Ragna. She charmingly gazed at the sisters who were a bit separated from them.

"Please forgive her for suddenly intruding. When it comes to her sister, she will just disregard anything on her surroundings."

"You saw it, huh?"

A little while ago, his body realized it directly.

"Well, it's just because Celica is very important to her, right? ...I know she's being overprotective, but I've got problems with that."

Ragna spoke before sipping his tea while the spectacled woman giggled.

"Just like Celica-san said, you're very gentle, Ragna-san."

"What do you mean...? I don't get it."

"Ufufu. You're so shy."

As expected, the spectacled woman was viewing Celica and her older sister as if looking at playful kittens. Then, she took a sip of the warm tea.

"My name's Trinity~. And that girl is Nine. As you may already know, she's Celica-san's big sis."

"Nine?"

"Of course, it's not her real name. She's currently the ninth of the Magic Guild's Ten Saints. Therefore, she's called Nine."

"Hmm. I see."

It was a fitting reaction toward it, but Ragna's response didn't mean that he felt the name was unusual.

Nine. The Six Heroes defeated the Black Beast, and among them, there was someone named Nine. If that was the case, then she was probably...

"It's actually just a title. But it seems Nine isn't that fond with her real name~."

"The reason's probably her old man, huh?"

As Ragna muttered, Trinity bitterly smiled while furrowing her eyebrows.

On the opposite side, the usual tension could be heard from the voices of Celica and Nine.

In regard to Celica's serious pleading of *Ragna isn't a bad person!*, Nine said her opinions like *it's not good being together with a man that has doubtful origins, let alone when he's no less than small fry*, or, *isn't it like picking up a dirty animal?*. At any rate, they were horrible things to say.

Trinity listened to that conversation while charmingly smiling and sipping her own cup.

"When she discovered that Celica-san had gone to find her father, Nine was in a panic. She always and always searched for her."

"Well, it's her sister's nature after all. Of course she'd be worried."

He didn't know what other things she was capable of, but her handicap of not having any sense of direction had burdened them so that they were barely able to reach the mountain near the port. It might have been not less than a miracle for them to have been able to get there.

"That's why a while ago she entered the mountain, relying on the powerful magic that had suddenly occurred. When she finally came across Celica-san, Nine felt so relieved. But when she saw a man she had never seen together with her sister, she was sooo surprised. ...And then, she felt a little determined."

"The meaning of her determination was different."

Despite Trinity grinning as sweet as sweet pastry, Ragna wondered why he sensed a dangerous aura the moment he said those words.

"That, too, was because of her feelings for Celica-san. Please excuse her~."

"I'm not that angry. But it sure was painful."

His forehead still hurt. There might still be shoe marks there.

"...Though, I know that she's just worried about her sister."

"Oh my. Does Ragna-san have siblings, too?"

"Nope. I still can't remember about that clearly."

Celica had already told Nine and Trinity about when he was unconscious and the amnesia he got.

His memories were certainly coming back little by little. His mind especially felt clear immediately after he went to the Alucard residence.

Nonetheless, there were still many blurry parts. He tried to absorb the meaning of the word 'sister' which Trinity had said repeatedly.

Did he have a younger sister? Or maybe a younger brother? Either way, their existence was surely important.

"Why!? Why are you so against me searching for Father!?"

Celica's loud voice came in suddenly.

Before anyone noticed, the conversation went from talking about Ragna to Celica searching for her father.

Until now, Celica's tensed face was stiffening. She fixed her eyes on the sister that was a little taller and had a composed face.

"Don't you worry about Father? Japan has been like this for six years, but still no one knows where Father is or whether he's alive. It's weird!"

"It's a rare occurrence for someone to be alive if they're in Japan when the Black Beast appeared. Many people have been missing for a while, and now they're treated as if they've died. Even you should understand it, right?"

"But there were survivors!"

"It's just a coincidence. It's meaningless to find him."

"That's not true! At least, I want to know if he's in good health, or if I'm not able to meet him anymore..."

"And how will you do that!?"

Nine's voice became harsh.

The piercing tone of voice blocked Celica's reply back in her throat. However, her staring eyes didn't flinch. She wasn't that weak of a younger sister.

Rather, as the one who seriously shouted, it was Nine who was flinched as she dropped her gaze. To calm herself down, she took a deep breath.

"And what if he's alive? After you're satisfied with meeting that man again, are you going to return home together with him?"

"No. It's not like that. Not at all..."

Even after she had regained her composure, Nine didn't hide her irritation.

Celica desperately tryied to get the right words as she shook her head forcefully. Her long hair danced around.

"I just want to find him. If he turns out to be okay, then that's enough. If he's injured and in poor condition, then I'll heal him. And once again... Father will become like his former self and try his best to do lots of research for the better of society. I'm fine with just that."

"...For the better of society, huh."

Averting her eyes, Nine let out a short breath. Immediately, Celica's face was dyed in anxiety. But before she asked something, a third voice interrupted them.

"Nine. If you scold Celica-san that hard, wouldn't you feel sorry for her?"

It was Trinity. Before anyone noticed, she had stood between the two sisters. Just like when she interfered with Ragna and Nine who were fighting each other... or rather a one-sided violence.

"If only you spoke more honestly. Like, 'I was very worried. I'm glad you're okay'..."

"What do you mean? That's what I've been saying until now."

"You didn't say it."

Since Nine was too haughty with her reply, Ragna unconsciously let his mouth to interrupt her. At that moment, a frightening gaze eyed him.

"...Ahem. Anyway, if you just wander aimlessly in Japan, you won't reach your goal. There's a nuclear attack, and stuff similar to Black Beast fragments remained all over the place. Don't do futile efforts anymore. Let's get home already."

Folding her arms below the voluptuous bosom, Nine made a statement while trying to be careful not to make her tone sound harsh. Nevertheless, there were glimpses of irritation in every word she said.

Like Trinity had said, Celica must have been anxious and troubled.

Even Celica fully understood her intention. However, the younger sister shook her head stubbornly.

"I don't want to give up yet."

"Celica!"

"Anything's fine. I can accept anything that happened... but I want to know what's going on with Father. If I don't put this to an end, I'll keep worrying about Father forever. I might also drag someone down."

Celica crossed both of her hands in front of her chest.

"Even if the worst case happened, I'll accept it completely. It's better than being clueless like this. ...I want to properly know what happened to Father."

If in the end nothing would be gained, rather than keep wishing for unseen things, it's better to have something visible stolen away. Of course, it would be ideal if that visible something within their arms could return.

Celica's voice was confessing as if she were praying. Her chest seemed to be suffocating. Unable to stay quiet, Ragna stood up. He took Clavis' map that Celica had been holding in her hand and presented it to Nine. She must have been gripping it tightly. It was crumpled.

"An acquaintance told us to go there since there might be some clues. We're already close to it. Only a bit more, so let her be satisfied."

Nine didn't seem amused. But she took back her previous blatant hostility and looked at the presented map. Still crossing her arms, she didn't move her hands.

"...The First District, hm?"

"Do you recognize it, Onee-chan!?"

"The vicinity was nothing but a place related to Black Beast."

Nine spoke, looking a bit uncomfortable.

The reason was simple. Ragna asked her about it.

"You're aware that your old man's got something to do with Black Beast, huh?"

"Eh!?" said Celica as she let her voice out. Celica stared at her older sister with a surprised look on her face.

Nine didn't give a nod, but with an affirmative expression she answered.

"...The one who investigated it was the Magic Guild, after all. It's natural."

A mere ordinary pupil like Celica might not be able to know about it, but it was a different case for a member of the Ten Saints like Nine. One could only wonder just how much information she had obtained which didn't make it to the public.

"So that's why you don’t want Celica to get close with her old man."

"You just happened to pass by. Don't act like you know everything. I felt discontent towards that man's researches in the past."

As if rejecting him, Nine averted her face from Ragna. Feeling completely annoyed, she then sighed and brushed up her long hair.

"As I thought, you're trying to trick her after all. I don't know from whom you got this, but he gave you a useless map."

Even with those kind of words, her tone of voice revealed that she had given up.

"...This the last time. If we don't find any clues after examining the First District, we'll take it that the man has died. Then we'll go home, okay?"

Nine stressed it while pointing her well-treated fingertip. It was the utmost bargain she could give.

Even when Celica was a bit hesitant, she gave a big nod since it was better than to shake her head and get dragged home.

"Yup. Got it."

"Well then, what are we going to do~?"

"Hmph. You already know it, Trinity."

At her friend's prompt of a smile, Nine spoke with a disappointed tone. Her rolled up sharp eyes were looking to Celica in resignation.

"Since it's you we're talking about, you'll probably get lost. I'll take you until the First District, so put away that useless map."

Averting her face suddenly, Nine turned her back from Ragna and Celica. Contrary to her harsh words, the movement of her hair, which was long enough to reach her hips, was graceful.

Celica looked at Ragna with a delightful face. Then, she leaped to reach the arm of her sister who had turned her back.

"Thank you, Onee-chan!"

"This is reaaaaaaally the last time I do this."

"I know, I know."

The sisters were talking as they returned to where they had come. As for Ragna and Trinity, both were giving a pleasant but bitter smile at the scene. Just as they had expected, the sisters were going back to the same ruined mountain trail.

The First District.

Once formerly a lushly green land, the landscape had what was called a small basin that was encircled by slightly elevated mountains.

It was the location where the Susano'o Unit and the Cauldron were discovered. A few years before the Black Beast had appeared, the place was under the control of the government. Since the progress of the excavation, its investigation was considered not to be going any further, and so the rights for it had been sold to a private company. Afterward, the records became blurry.

Six years ago, the Black Beast crawled out from underneath to the surface.

And several months later, it became the target of a nuclear strike.

There was a gigantic crater within the mountainous region. On the mess of the ground that had suffered scars from destruction that was caused by the Black Beast, there were many holes spreading out. One could sense nothingness.

"There."

On a place overlooking the crater, Nine pointed at the center of that nothingness.

Since it was covered by sand, it couldn't be seen clearly. A giant metallic gate so big, a small aircraft could enter through. The gate that lead to the underground was left behind in a destroyed state.

"Originally, there was a facility that was connecting the building with the surface, but..."

Nine didn't finish her sentence. After some time had passed, nuclear weapons had been dropped to kill the Black Beast. Everything vanished without a trace.

Trinity proceeded to chant some short words. A protective magic then unfolded around them. Incredibly, there wasn't anything like sand, metal, or anything exceptional that would make their chests feel nauseous. They were wrapped up in bland air.

Was it because of the effects from the continuous nuclear attack that there wasn't any blowing wind on the Japanese island?

Inside the crater, there was radiation and several chemical substances leaking from the ground caused by the nuclear attack. If there wasn't any means of protection, treading upon it would not get them very far since their internal organs would get roasted.

Descending into the crater, they were now facing the gate in the middle.

Taking a closer look, it was truly enormous and impressive.

Besides the enormous gate that looked like it was covering something, there was something else. It was a normal-sized door, and while it was composed from solid metal, it was forced open. Then, they went in.

When they exited the firm entrance that was isolating the place from the surface, what lay ahead of them was as if it were a different world.

Sheets of metal spread before them on the floors, walls, and ceilings. There were several places that had rust and discoloration. The colors and odors induced shivering.

Ragna and the others headed down to the metallic passageway. The passageway continued circularly, like roads following the circumference of a gigantic digging site.

The top half of the wall circling the hole was a thin fence. The spectacle peeking from its crevice was magnificent.

"It's really deep..."

While grabbing the fence with her fingers, Celica looked at the other side while she spoke.

What was there was the mouth of a gigantic hole which was enveloped by darkness.

The bottom remained yet to be seen as they didn't know how far the hole had been dug. If the fence wasn't there, the depth would induce vertigo that would invite someone to fall into it.

Surrounding the hole, there was a similar passageway encircling it where a great number of lower floors could be seen below. There were also stairs and elevators connecting the upper and lower floors. Heading down the passageway, the circle grew smaller. The digging site looked similar, as if it were a large mortar.

But the passageway and the installed equipment there were destroyed miserably.

Although the facility was in a good condition back six years ago, it was now disintegrated ruins that let itself be deteriorated.

The scars left behind by Black Beast were deep.

"The entry door must have been repaired after Black Beast had made its appearance~"

That exceptional door was the only thing that was able to preserve its original shape. Trinity spoke while she was looking at a snapped iron pole from faraway. Nine nodded in agreement as her cold eyes looked down upon the thick darkness.

"Seems so. Probably... to protect the Cauldron that was inside."

Even if the research facility wasn't functioning, they had already excavated the Cauldron, which was the Boundary's important point. There had to be countless people wanting to make use of it. Nine's tone of voice sounded like she despised those kind of people.

Awfully loud noise resounded every time they walked in the passageway. The sounds of footsteps within the silent place unnecessarily agitated their nervousness.

Coincidently, the rasping sound of footsteps let Ragna and the others knew that there wasn't anyone else who was walking within the passageway other than themselves.

"Nevertheless... I'm surprised. Even though I believe that this facility amassed the best of the scientific technology from their time... they seemed to also utilize alchemy if you take a closer look around."

With great interest, Nine stroked the weird pattern on the chiseled wall she passed by. Having lost the functionality from the used technique, the pattern didn't give any response. Nine got bored of it as she cleaned off the dust that was dirtying her fingers.

"Those people were combining science and magic. It'd be wonderful if another area of expertise were born since they were able to do that. Jeez..."

Her muttering that had started as admiration transformed to a grumbling in the end.

While she couldn't help but giggle, Trinity enlightened Ragna.

"Nine's researching that kind of technique back in the Magic Guild."

"Combining science and magic?"

"That's correct. But of course, it's not for building this kind of large research facility~"

Nine lightly snorted, cutting her off.

Trinity giggled again. Like a child getting blamed for a prank, she ducked her head.

Trying to get back to the topic, Nine continued on after giving a big sigh.

"...It's not only the building. This large-scale excavation also made use of alchemy and magic. Under no circumstances could they have easily dug a ridiculously big hole like this with just machinery."

"But it's magic. Not many people should be able to use it... right?"

Feeling uneasy, Celica asked her sister. It was because she was a mage who belonged to the Magic Guild. She understood how, in this age where magic almost had no acknowledgment, it was very difficult and rare to combine science and magic, like what Nine just said.

However, just like Nine had said, she could see a strong influence of magic on every technique in her surroundings.

"That's the extent of how the First District relates to the deep-rooted part of this society."

Nine said it over her shoulders while being annoyed. She was not pleased with the ulterior motive of someone who worked only to dig up ancient objects, and making use of magic, all while concealing themselves in the shadow of society.

Within the flickering of the exhausted lights, Ragna, looking disinterested, grumbled while viewing the scene around the vicinity.

"Science and magic, huh...? I'm trying to differ them bit by bit, but I still don't really get it."

In the period where Ragna had come from, roughly a hundred years later, magic had scientific aspects in it while science had magical aspects in it. Blurring the separating line between them made various technologies to be discovered. So Ragna just couldn't grasp the old-fashioned 'combining magic with science was something hard and rare' like what Nine just said.

"Oh?" said Nine as stopped while deliberately turning around. It was the first time that Ragna saw her heartful smile.

"If only the great people in this world have a good-natured mind like you, that would be nice."

Her remark was just the same as usual. Ragna frowned bitterly.

"Yeah, sure. Sorry for being good-natured."

"Indeed. An idiot is just worthless."

"Why, you..."

Even though he never considered himself a smart person, he was not amused when it was asserted directly like that. Clenching his fist, Ragna's lips twitched as it made a smile. That time, Celica's hair swayed as she broke into a run.

"Ah, hey!"

"Hey, don't go on your own!"

Simultaneously, Nine and Ragna quickly called out for her to stop. If they were to lose sight of Celica in such a large, unknown place, there was no telling where she might end up.

Still, Celica stopped several meters ahead and violently waved her hand as she turned to them.

"Say, it seems to still move!"

What Celica had discovered was a spacious elevator hall which jutted out above a deep-stretching hole.

Fortunately, the damage done by Black Beast only gouged half of the hall. The remaining half had a single elevator contraption that, while slightly damaged, had a green lamp that continuously blinked, informing of its arrival.

After Celica touched the tip of the thin cylinder protruding from the floor, the sounds of machinery being operated hummed before the elevator's door opened.

"I see," said Celica as she nodded.

"Instead of searching little by little from the top, it might be faster if we went straight down."

"Seems so. At least we didn't find any person on this floor."

Ragna once again skimmed around the passageway they had walked on. From the entrance until here, the passageway was deserted. There wasn't any hint of any living beings at all, let alone a human. The passageway on the other side was collapsed in the middle. There didn't seem to be any place being concealed over there.

"It's a bit exciting."

Being the only one with sparkling interest in her eyes, Trinity entered the elevator's box after Celica did. Nine and Ragna followed them.

"You know how to operate it?"

"Of course."

Celica nodded while looking at Ragna who was peeking inside. There were numerous buttons lined up near the door. As Celica's finger pressed one of them, the door closed. After she pressed another, the box started descending.

Although its structure was made by scientific technique, the box was actually operating using magic with alchemy as its basis. The burdens-free floating feeling that was gently enveloping them was none other because the box was currently gliding.

Like a thick wire slipping down between fingers, the elevator descending gently, but with enough speed.

In the box, there were windows installed at the height of one's face. Looking back over his shoulder, Ragna took a view from the outside.

What he saw was darkness. Within it, sometimes the illuminations from the circles of passageways could be seen passing from below to upward.

Likewise, he only saw darkness down below. It was like they were swallowed inside the belly of a mysterious gigantic being.

"I wonder if Father's here."

Standing next to Ragna, Celica softly murmured.

Moving only his gaze, Ragna looked at the girl beside him. With her hand touching the windowpane that was accumulating years of dust, Celica stared at the darkness with a wishful look.

No, perhaps she was actually wishing for something. For her father's safety. For him to be innocent. For another real reunion with him.

"...You've come here to make sure of it, right?"

"Yes... That's right."

Celica's lips raised up slightly. Feelings of numbness came to Ragna's chest merely because of that change of facial expression.

Why did it happen? Sometimes, a painful feeling floated across his chest when he looked at Celica.

Expectation and anxiety trembling in her eyes, Ragna unwittingly lifted his fingers to the profile of Celica.

He himself wasn't sure why he considered touching Celica. But somehow, he wanted to kindly comfort her and tell her that it was going to be okay.

However, just before Ragna's hand tapped Celica's thin shoulder, the elevator that had been going down smoothly until then suddenly screeched a grating metallic sound and stopped with a violent shake.

It seemed like some kind of assault collided with it. As the noise faded away, a light went off and illuminated the elevator's interior all of a sudden. An emergency lamp was shining in a dim orange light.

"Wha... What happened all of a sudden!?"

As if drowning Nine's scream, the elevator shook again.

This time... figuratively speaking, they were caught in a dangerous situation; if the elevator couldn't withstand their weights, it would slip down.

In disbelief, Ragna turned around to the window behind him. What was on the other side of the window was the outside scenery which was slowly swaying left and right.

No. It wasn't the scenery that was swaying around, but the elevator's box with four people inside. It was only supported by a single point on the top part of the right side where the lined up floor buttons were. Slowly moving, it was like a weight hung at the end of a string. Just like a pendulum.

"Get out! It'll fall!"

No sooner after he shouted, Ragna clung to the entrance. He tried to shove in his left hand inside the crevice between the double doors. But it didn't budge.

Nine stepped forward while feeling irritated.

"You can't open it with just a left arm! I'll use magic to...!"

"Stop! It'll fall if there's a shock!"

"Then what do we do!?"

"Please... open up!"

On the corner of his eye, Celica, who was next to Nine, was pummeling the buttons. The alchemic device had been carrying four people with unfitting comfort while inside a ruin. But it was now completely silent, similar to rubbles.

"What should we do...? We can't attempt to do teleportation while inside an unstable place like this..."

Even Trinity couldn't stay calm within this situation.

During the moment of confusion within the small box, Ragna intuitively drew the sword from his waist. Ever since he heard an audible creak from above, he had a grave feeling. There was no time.

"UOOOOOOOHH!"

Giving all his strength, he slashed several times. Then with all his might, he hurled a kick to the disfigured metallic doors of the elevator until it fell off into the gigantic pit.

The shaft and wire that were supporting the elevator were about to snap off. The wire of the box, which Ragna and the others were in, was in its last straw.

Creaking, the box was slipping down. They didn't have a long time.

Fortunately, the distance to the elevator's ceiling was just about one third of their heights. The plate appeared to be damaged to the point that it was torn.

"Get up there!"

"I know!"

After giving Ragna a harsh reply, Nine nimbly jumped up. Her plump body slipped through the gap and went up. From the opposite side, she held out her hand.

"Hurry!"

The creaking noise started to get louder. Willing it or not, the distorted sound made them impatient.

Ragna held up the slow Trinity with his left arm before Nine pulled her up.

Continuing on, Celica was also taken by force and was held up.

But... just when he did that, the worst kind of gruesome noise petrified their ears.

The sound of something got snapped. It was the last cry of the metal fittings that were connecting the wire to the elevator.

"CELICA!!"

Nine shouted in desperation.

Half-throwing her, Ragna lifted Celica up and pushed her until Nine's hand got hold of her.

He then immediately kicked the elevator's floor. He didn't jump up to where Nine was. He didn't even have the intention to go that far.

In the middle of jumping, Ragna widely swung his sword and aimed below to the edge of the floor that was dangling on the void before diagonally thrusting it.

With half of the sword buried on the floor, Ragna was hanging midair while gripping the sword's handle.

Lifting up his gaze he saw that Celica was close by. Her feet didn't touch the floor and were dangling in midair.

Taking them by surprise, the elevator's box started to drop after it finally used up all of its strength. They couldn't afford to make sure how far it would fall.

"Celica! Put your feet on the sword!"

"Eh. Ah. Uh...!"

While clinging to Nine's arm, her teary face instantly looked at Ragna.

"Quick! It'll fall!"

"O-Oka..."

Her reply wasn't clear. Desperately, Celica put her feet on the blade's broad portion of the sword that was pierced diagonally to the floor.

Relying on the temporary foothold, she supported her body. She crawled and went up.

After finally getting a safe footing, she hurriedly looked back to Ragna.

"Ragna should also quickly..."

Despite her waist was giving out, she stretched her hand while speaking in a tearful voice.

But before Celica could finish her words, a familiar noise groaned on the gap between Ragna and Celica.

Aah. Ragna felt a strange insight when he heard the sound. Celica's eyes opened wide instantly.

Ragna's sword was pierced to the floor's edge. The cracks from the first time the sword thrusted into were spreading without pause. Then, the sword became unstuck and fell—it all happened in slow motion.

"Ragna! Stretch your arm!"

Celica shouted in a tearful voice. But if he were to release the hand that was gripping the sword, he would certainly fall. His other arm couldn't be moved, let alone stretched.

He saw that Nine was doing something like chanting magic he was unfamiliar with.

Apart from it however, the crumbling had reached its end.

The portion of the sword that had been stuck was now falling, along with a part of the floor. Ragna once again got dragged into the dark void.

"RAGNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Celica continued to stretch her hand with all her might even when she was pulled by Nine. Her figure rapidly grew smaller.

Aah. There was a moment like this way back then...

While remembering such déjà vu within the corner of his mind, Ragna fell within the deep, deep hole.

Ragna didn't fall on the metallic-plated floor, but rather on the ground surface that was as cold as freezing rock. Thankfully, he didn't seem to receive that much of an impact. He immediately raised his body.

"Tch... That was seriously dangerous."

As far as he remembered, he likely had repeatedly put his so-called life in danger.

Somewhat dejected, he stood up and put the sword that had tumbled nearby back to his waist. Then, Ragna once more looked toward his surroundings and tensed up.

There was a basement built which was even further down compared to all the descending he did until now. The place was similar to a huge dome. The metallic plates that were covering the whole place were stripped off in several spots. The freezing soils behind it were exposed.

Ragna was standing on a floor that had eerie traces of cuts. Even if Ragna were to spread both of his arms, it wouldn't even reach the length of the cuts. Including the soil, the metallic plates were gouged as if someone was trying to make a road there. But sometimes there were cuts like something was crawling and quickly climbing up higher and higher.

The traces of something going back and forth. For example... something unimaginable like a gigantic serpent crawling about.

Then it left, leaving behind many scars. Although Ragna never saw anything that could actually do that, he had an idea about it.

And then another one. Something had snatched Ragna's gaze.

A Cauldron.

The object was the starting place of the gigantic serpent's crawling traces as it was heading toward the surface. Its large hole was spread out. The hole was surrounded by partially destroyed devices on its rim. Its mouth was filled with surging lava.

It was as if looking through the center of the earth. However, what was on the opposite side wasn't the earth's core, but a space that transcended everything. The Boundary.

"This is..."

Oddly, the vast underground dome seemed to be made to cover the Cauldron. But ultimately, the place was made by humans. Garnished by all kinds of devices, the Cauldron was the focal point of the location.

The overwhelming heat reached as high as the ceiling. Even so, an ominous chill was still drifting about. Another air was flowing from the world where people were living in.

Aimlessly, Ragna took a step forward.

His head was in pain. The headache and dizziness resembled a bell chiming in his head. His body would be robbed of its balance in any moment. Ragna was about to fall down the ground.

Using the huge ceiling plate that was stuck on the ground, he supported his body.

The headache was terrible. Rather than saying his head split, it felt more like something was being dragged out from within his head.

"Ugh... Argh... Guh..."

Unable to withstand it, he strongly clutched his head and groaned. The immobile right arm was hurting like it was being ground. The right eye which was unable to reflect light was hot as if burning.

"Uagh. Agh. Aaaaaaargghh...!"

His trembling throat was howling in pain. Cold sweat oozed out.

Information, images, records, feelings. They came out of nowhere and rushed into his head. All of them. The enormous amount of them crushed Ragna's skull from the inside. It was definitely, definitely not normal.

...But every storm would eventually fade away. The pressure on the inside from the waves of information slowly, slowly drew back.

Later on after the aching and pain subsided, his memories were completely restored without anything obstructing it.

"I... So it was that time..."

Why he had arrived in such a distant past. He remembered what had caused it.

Everything was because of what was on the other side of this Cauldron... It was all related to the Boundary.

Then, if he were to make a contact with the Boundary once more, he might return to his original time. He considered it while adjusting his breath that had been disturbed by pain.

But that thought suddenly halted.

A feeling like being torn by a blade of ice crept up from Ragna's spine to the nape.

Someone was here. No, something was approaching.

Unable to afford to look back, Ragna turned over his body and slid into a nearby hiding spot.

He didn't know why he hid. But there was something bad there. His instinct gave off violent warnings.

Before long, footsteps were coming down.

It was alone.

It wasn't Celica. Not Nine nor Trinity, much less Mitsuyoshi.

More heavy, more intimidating.

The nonchalant noise simply trampled both reason and irrationality.

Behind the dropped ceiling plates and machinery that had fallen from somewhere, Ragna stole a glance at the approaching figure. Like a child frightened by a soldier, he peeked from the slight opening.

Instantly, he gasped.

The heat from the lava within the Cauldron acted as light and shone on the figure.

A well-proportioned body. A tall and firm figure. Things like red eyeballs attached around the achromatic clothes which covered the whole body.

The most distinctive feature was the face.

Facial expressions and emotions. As if the purpose was to hide them... the face was concealed by a pure white mask.

"Ma..."

Unintentionally letting his voice out, Ragna swallowed his words of surprise.

(Masked bastard...)

With this, he had encountered four people who existed within his memories. But only he lacked any difference. He was... one of the Six Heroes. Hakumen.

If there was something different, it was the willpower. The pressure from his presence that Ragna felt was tremendous. With just a step forward, it suppressed the atmosphere of the place. Removing all impurities, the blade kept sharping his killing intent to the limit.

Approximately a hundred years later, Ragna would encounter the person called Hakumen. However, compared to the killing intent that was now before Ragna's eyes, he only had nothing more than its remnants.

Within his cover, Ragna noticed that his breathing grew thin and shuddered. His knees collapsed, and his hips gave out.

If he were discovered, he would be killed. He assumed it without any reason whatsoever. He believed it almost certainly. The tension pierced deep into Ragna's body.

"...Strange."

Hakumen murmured in a low, flat voice.

The long silver hair swayed as he took two, three steps, approaching the Cauldron. His neck was turning around at the vicinity.

"There was certainly a dark presence within here..."

A small noise like metal being scraped could be heard. Hakumen raised the katana by his hand.

From the opposite side of the research facility's wreckage where Ragna hid himself, he could see that the white face was attentively observing the surroundings.

"What is the matter, Dark One? I do not care if you are only a wretched remnant. Show yourself before my blade."

Every word sounded like heavy slashes.

Ragna exhaled carefully.

(This is... the true masked bastard...)

Anyone would feel that he was truly terrifying.

Suddenly, Hakumen stopped moving. After examining the surroundings up until now, he stared at a single point where there was a presence.

Ragna couldn't make sure of it. But the expressionless white mask seemed to be intensely focusing to the back of the junk where Ragna hid himself.

With one large step, his feet moved forward.

Ragna's body became stiff.

He could hear something being slipped out of a scabbard.

The oddly long silver blade reflected the light of the lava that was leaking from the Cauldron. If he kept advancing, the blade would be even more dyed in vibrant red. By Ragna's blood.

Death. The absolute phrase clung within Ragna's mind.

With his immobile right arm suspended, his left hand strongly gripped the handle of his sword.

"......Wh...!?"

From the tall ceiling, a high-pitched female voice resounded.

Hakumen's feet came to a halt.

Afterward, several footsteps could be heard hurriedly running down a staircase.

They descended to the underground cave in no time and came across Hakumen who was standing in front of the Cauldron. They stopped while displaying their wariness.

"...What are you?"

The one who was standing ahead was Nine. Caught in front of Hakumen's figure, she put herself on guard while protecting Celica and Trinity behind her.

Hakumen also turned around to face Nine with blade in hand.

"...A magician."

The tension strained to the point where it was painful.

"You don't seem to be a survivor from this facility. ...Are you even a human being?"

Whether she was inquiring or couldn't help but confirm her suspicion in words, Nine put out a low voice.

Hakumen's white mask seemed to be staring at something. As if examining the presences, he only motionlessly faced forward.

Neither side moved. They couldn't move.

If the unpleasant pretense were to be interrupted like cutting a strained thread, that would result in violent destruction. It was not the aftermath Nine... nor Hakumen wished for.

"The dark presence is gone."

Abruptly, Hakumen told something. He sheathed the blade he held to the scabbard on his back.

Nevertheless, Nine still hadn't dropped her guard. A mysterious white-faced man. She felt that what she was facing now had completely crossed over human intellect.

"...I see. I understand who all of you are."

The passed words which were directed toward someone were vanishing as if sinking heavily.

"It is acceptable for the moment of our fateful meeting to be now. ...My sword's purpose is to defeat the Dark One. It is not for slaying fragile human beings like you."

"You... Just what do you know?"

Judging from her question, Nine was startled. The mask didn't have anything that resembled eyes, so there shouldn't have existed any place to look from... And yet, she had a feeling that she was being seen directly.

Although the sharp sword had been sheathed, he gave off an air that if one were to carelessly approach him, they would be immediately sliced without any hesitation. Even with that, the faceless man calmly spoke something.

"...Until then."

Then, he quickly kicked the ground and leaped.

"Wait!"

Raising the corner of her eyes, Nine yelled. However, when she looked over there, the silver figure had already gone.

The girls had come down using the staircase along the wall. But there was nothing but silence within the darkness.

The sharp tension had stiffened their muscles. But the remains of it were drifting away.

"Just now..."

Next to Nine who was looking for the silver figure, Trinity displayed her uneasiness. The unfathomable person who couldn't be seen. Reflecting upon it, Trinity sensed the thread of unavoidable destiny.

"Nine. I know that this is nothing but a hunch."

"What? Speak clearly."

"I believe that we'll meet that person again. Most likely in a distant future."

Something beyond reasoning had told Trinity that this moment was the beginning of a circle. The same premonition also somewhat appeared within Nine's chest.

Because Hakumen had left, it was as if the atmosphere within the underground cave regained its warmth once more.

"Ragna!"

At the same time, Celica noticed Ragna who was sitting down behind a cover. She rushed over to him.

"Thank goodness... Are you okay? How about wounds?"

"No..."

Celica's hands touched his shoulders. Feeling the sensation and body temperature, relief suddenly came to Ragna. He thought he was going to die. Exterminated by that sword.

No, if Nine and the others were slightly delayed, that might have come true.

"Ragna?"

"Aah, I'm fine. Though I hit several things when I fell."

Toward Celica, who was looking at him worryingly, Ragna replied with a stiff smile. Even so, it was hard to make a smile. With the fear still not gone, he couldn't help but worry if his voice was trembling when he answered.

"Does it hurt?"

"Nah, I'm okay."

Shaking his head, Ragna grabbed the ceiling plate he had used as a shield to stand up. Truthfully, he might have been in pain, but now that feeling had gone off somewhere else.

Fortunately, having overcome the silver terror, his body stopped trembling and he was able to support it.

"You're quite healthy for someone who fell from that height."

Nine's high heels hit the solid floor.

"By the way... Do you know that strange man?"

It was as if her tone of voice accused him like he should have known about him since he was hiding.

Removing his hand from the ceiling plate after pushing it away, Ragna gripped his hand forcefully.

"Yeah. But then again, I don't know him that well."

"What is he?"

"Beats me. I also want to know."

"Then, what about his name?"

"...It's Hakumen."

It was the name the guy referred himself as. With that as the exception, Ragna didn't know anything else regarding that silver man.

Where did he came from, and what was he trying to do? Was he even a human? The wish to know more was just as much as not wanting to know anything else. He felt that if he ever learned about him somehow... he wouldn't be able to go back to the way he was before.

"Is that... the Cauldron? Where the Black Beast came from...?"

After confirming that there wasn't any serious injury that stood out on Ragna, Celica finally regained her composure. Then, she looked towards the gigantic hole which was excreting its overwhelming presence within the underground cave.

Starting with Celica, the squirming red lava within it begun to bathe everyone's face in red light.

"It's the gate of hell. Mankind shouldn't stick their noses in it."

Nine spoke spitefully.

"I don't know if it's the Original Unit or the Boundary... But if only they weren't discovered, a lot of people wouldn't have had to die."

"...Yeah."

Ragna saw that Celica immediately frowned as if she were in pain.

Averting her eyes, Nine turned her back from the boiling Cauldron and went forward.

"I don't want to linger in this place any longer. We should quickly... Huh, Trinity?"

The hooded figure that should have been near her was missing. Confused, everyone looked around their surroundings. The figure whom they had been searching for earlier replied back.

"Hey~ What's this?"

The voice they had heard was definitely Trinity's. Due to the light from the scorching heat of the Cauldron, a distinct shadow was projected on a part of the underground cave. The voice that could be heard came from within it.

"What's wrong, Trinity-san?"

Celica quickly jogged and approached the shadow to peek inside. While being puzzled, Ragna and Nine followed her.

Inside the shadow, Trinity, with both knees on the ground, fixed her gaze toward a part of the wall.

It seemed due to the impact from the Black Beast toward the Cauldron's surroundings that most of the metallic plates from the wall had become loose. What Trinity currently saw was a bare-naked bedrock. Trinity's white hand traced a part of the bedrock.

"Is there... something here?"

From behind Trinity, Celica, Ragna, and also Nine leaned their faces together to look at it.

There were cracks running down the bedrock. It appeared the bedrock might have been previously placed there to conceal something.

No. It was certainly for that very purpose.

Beyond the cracks. There was some kind of a metal visible from beyond the slightly crumbled bedrock. With a brute force that didn't suit her delicate fingers, Trinity tore off the dark brown chunks.

The dry lumps of mud weakly crumbled.

"Ah..."

Celica raised her voice. Underneath the bedrock, metal sheets appeared subsequently more and more. Judging by the appearance, it didn't seem to look small.

"Step aside a bit."

Replacing Trinity's place, Ragna thrusted his sword toward the cracks. It crumbled completely.

The whole thing that was concealed was now revealed. Each of them gasped in surprise.

What was there was a single door.

Chapter 5: Sealed Green

———Log...

What was that?

What actually was that? Why did this happen? Why?

From the Cauldron, a black object began overflowing.

I cannot determine what it was.

Relius had said that it was not Kusanagi. That Relius disappeared... swallowed by the black object.

Did he die?

Tell me, Relius. What is the best action that I should take?

Is that the object that we have created?

Wrong. That object is...

The Sheol Gate.

That object is not of this world.

Why did it happen?

That's right.

The lynchpin.

I have made it for the sake of such a moment like this.

However, the key isn't in what I have left.

The key... I have to obtain it somehow. But how?

I'm not able to do anything else.

I can only wait here until my life is exhausted...

The out of place door which Trinity had discovered was pretty plain.

According to Celica, the door had an old lock that was quite simple. Ragna easily opened it with just a few kicks.

What awaited there was a thin, dark passage. Unlike other places, this passage didn't have any illumination. In the first place, there didn't seem to be any lighting installed.

Relying on the light Trinity had made with magic, they advanced inside with Ragna as the lead. Then, they reached somewhere. But there was only another door that stood still inside the dark passage.

"This one has an electronic lock."

Celica, who was walking behind Ragna, said that while looking at the small panel beside the door. They weren't sure whether if it was thanks to the electric source of the whole facility that was still active, or if it had an independent electric source, but the lock was functioning securely.

Ragna tried to knock it lightly. The security here was tighter unlike at the entrance. It didn't seem to budge no matter how many times it was kicked.

"So, what do we do? Frankly, it's too much effort to break it off by beating it."

"It's also too dangerous to just blast the door off. We might get caught in it."

Recalling the time when she was about to blow the elevator's door, Nine quickly said it while shaking her head. But there was a smile without any worry whatsoever on her expression.

"So, we'll do it like this."

While saying it, Nine's supple fingers sparkled. Thin electric currents from her fingers shocked the electronic panel. Sparks scattered around.

A moment later, the secure bulky door was separated in the middle. It sluggishly started to open its upper and lower ends.

"Seriously...?"

"Onee-chan's amazing..."

Having too quickly cleared their objective, Ragna and Celica couldn't help but mutter their admiration.

"Fufu", smiled Nine triumphantly.

"If you construct a system so advanced to a certain point, it actually becomes easier for the user to understand what the system's saying."

Different from the previous elevator that had stopped functioning smoothly, this one was still working. Perhaps instead of 'understand what the system's saying', maybe 'you could forcefully bash it as you like' was more appropriate.

Nine shook off the remaining electricity which was coiling around her fingers as if removing intertwined threads.

Although the passage from the entrance until then was narrow, what lie in wait inside was an unexpectedly spacious room.

Rather than a room, it might have been better to call it a square.

When they first entered, the color of the illumination took over their visions. It was like it was dominating the room. As if the dark passage until now was a lie, the sophisticated and refreshing green-colored lights shone on.

The room had an elliptical landscape.

Within the interior that was surrounded by metallic plates, there were several machineries installed that seemed like measuring devices. It appeared some kind of development was being conducted. The desk where there was a computer put on had a large quantity of papers scattered around its perimeter. Several of them were stuck on the wall using tape.

However, it could be said that an unknown discomfort was drifting within the room.

"What's with this room...? It's like time is almost not moving~"

The first one to notice the source of their discomfort was Trinity. With uneasiness clouding her face, she turned about and looked around the room

Just as she had said, this room was odd.

Not having any of the Black Beast's scratch, it was spotless. It was as if just a few days ago, or maybe a few hours ago, since the last time someone had used it. The air flowing there had little to do with destruction and deterioration.

It didn't have any smell of dust or rust. It added more of the eeriness.

"I feel like we've wandered to a strange location."

While speaking bitterly, Nine cautiously proceeded to the inner part of the room.

Suddenly, the atmosphere which had wrapped around Ragna's group up until now trembled and vanished.

Trinity had dispelled her protective magic.

"We don't seem to need it for a while now."

Certainly, the air that was contaminating the First District which could roast their internal organs if they had no means of protection didn't seem to be there anymore. There was only clean air drifting about. It was fine to take a deep breath.

It wasn't only this room. The air within the cave from before where the Cauldron existed was also clear. The substance called seithr that was overflowing from the Cauldron neutralized the radiation and other harmful chemical substances. It didn't seem harmful. Instead, it even produced hygienic air.

But the only one in this room who understood its structure just by feeling it on her skin was Nine.

"A hidden room, huh."

Inhaling the strangely refreshing air which had been released by the seithr, Ragna walked within the room. He picked up a piece of paper that fell at his feet.

The bluish-green lightings were dim, but unexpectedly the small letters were legible. But since the writing was in Japanese, it was nothing more than cryptic letters he had never seen before.

Even though he didn't know the letters, Ragna understood the drawing. Ragna frowned at the numerous scribbles along with the hand drawing that was on the center of the paper.

There was something like... a large nail on it. It seemed to be a diagram for something. It was probably a blueprint or even something else entirely.

From the side, Celica peeked on what Ragna was holding.

"What's this? Something like a machine? It's like a nail... Ah!"

Inadvertently lifting her gaze just now, Celica made a loud voice. At the same time, she pointed toward the inner part of the room.

Silently blending within the green lightings, a gigantic object shaped like nail was hanging in the air alongside the wall.

If it was a nail, then it should have had crude silhouette. Yet it was so fascinating that it was like an ornament decorating the room. The green patterns stood out on the aesthetic silver surface. Metals and metals joined up together and drew straight lines. Those lines appeared to give off a calculated charm.

Ragna felt that its size, whether its height or width, could easily fit approximately three to four people. It might have been because of the lighting, but it could have possibly bene even larger.

It had a rather sacred feel drifting around as if it was a nail-shaped goddess statue. The beautiful main part was clad in several silver chains. The stakes pierced strongly to the ceiling and wall.

"Isn't this drawing actually about it?"

According to what Celica was pointing out, the drawing on the paper Ragna picked up was the blueprint for the captivating gigantic nail of an objet d'art.

If so, it seemed someone had created it as some kind of a device. That thought seemed unbelievable. Just how much of technology, knowledge, and insight was needed to create this kind of object?

The kind of dread like the Cauldron had crept up to Ragna's nape.

"It seems so. But how come this thing exists near the Cauldron?"

A hidden room even got built for it.

"This room's probably built to observe that Cauldron."

Trinity spoke while playing around with a computer a bit separated from them.

Ragna was surprised on how she handled it. Sometimes, he could see that there were small emblems shining on her fingertips. Perhaps she was borrowing the power of magic. At any rate, it was a handy magic.

Pushing up her big glasses, Trinity turned on the sub-display and showed it to Ragna and the others.

The view there was looking down from somewhere as it projected the front view of the Cauldron from before.

"Looking at this camera, it seems to be recording the changes in the atmosphere around the Cauldron, like temperature and humidity~. In addition, a lot of data is flowing in."

"Then... this device is also related to the Cauldron and Boundary, huh?"

Ragna took a glance at the silver and green nail from the image of the surveillance camera. Indeed, it had the imposing aura fitting to confront.

"...Oh?"

Continuing on fiddling with the computer, Trinity tilted her head in confusion.

Nine, who was picking up the scattered papers that were on top of a desk, turned around.

"What's the matter?"

"I was checking it up since it's been on my mind. As I thought, this room is odd."

The small magic circles that appeared on Trinity's fingertips were disappearing. He had to make sure again what he had seen just now.

"The data from this computer. The computer's clock. ...Not much time has passed since the day of the Black Beast's appearance~"

"The specific time?"

"...One year."

It was like only a year had passed in the room. Realistically, six years had passed since the appearance of Black Beast, but the time here had only passed a year.

"I see..."

While dropping her gaze to the documents she picked up, Nine muttered in displeasure. It seemed only Nine understood why the flow of time in this room was unusual.

Suddenly, Celica's behaviors made Ragna felt uneasy. Before he knew it, she had snatched the paper that had the diagram sketch from his hand. She had been staring it intensely for some time. She did it with enough enthusiasm to bore a hole in it.

When he looked at Nine, she was also staring with a grim face at the papers she had gathered up that was scattered on the floor before.

Ragna had a bad feeling.

"Celica?"

He softy called out to the tensed-up girl who was just beside him.

Celica's shoulders jumped as he did so. Then she looked at Ragna with such an anxiety that would make her tremble anytime soon.

"Ragna... This..."

"Something dangerous written here?"

Celica shook her head for so many times.

As if making sure of something unbelievable, she pointed at the writing that slanted upward badly as it went on, so bad you couldn't even pretend to say it was good. And then she gulped before starting to speak.

"This is... Father's handwriting."

In other words, Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's.

Someone whom Celica, Ragna, Mitsuyoshi, and Clavis had been seeking after.

Ragna's expression took a steep turn.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I don't have any doubt. I remember it very well."

Celica intensely stared at the diagram she held, but then also looked at it with affection. The footprints of the father she had been looking for were surely there.

Ragna once again looked up at the gigantic instrument which seemed like overlooking them. When he took a moment to observe the existence, he felt that its magnificence was overwhelming.

"Then, your old man created this?"

"At the very least, I think the design here was made by Father."

"So in the end, what's this thing? It's too fancy for an interior."

The ceiling above the silver and green nail was built exceptionally tall. The supporting chains were connected to several pulleys. When examined, they should be used to raise the nail even further up.

Celica took a glance at the diagram.

"It seems there's nothing written here that explains what it's for, but..."

Just as Celica was about to speak, a loud noise interrupted.

Everyone looked back all at once. Nine had read the documents that was scattered on a place separated from Ragna and Celica, also from Trinity. It was the sound of a bundle of papers thrown onto the measuring devices.

The five-centimeter thick documents she had collected hit the metallic box. Losing its strength, it once again scattered on the cold floor.

Nine stomped on the documents with all her strength. She put all the hatred from her heart.

"...Don't mess with me... JUST HOW ROTTEN IS YOUR MIND!!?"

Having been stomped with the sharp heel, one sheet was largely torn up. The panicked Celica tried to save the documents from her older sister's feet.

"Onee-chan, what are you doing!? These are Father's..."

"They are! That man undoubtedly wrote those! And also the blueprint and data containing the concept of that instrument! This is outrageous and no joke. No one but that man would construct such a ridiculous thing!"

"Hold on a moment. Tell me your reason properly. I'm completely clueless as to why you suddenly snapped."

Ragna forcedly interrupted both of them. He helped Celica, who had gathered the documents from the floor and held them to her chest, to stand.

In the meantime, Nine took a deep breath to adjust her breathing that was disturbed by her excessive anger. Even so, to vent her unsettled emotion, she struck the wall with her fist.

Worried, Trinity gently touched Nine's back. She took that chance to finally suppress her fury by biting her lips.

"...The Boundary is filled with the substance called seithr. The seithr was always overflowing continuously from that damned hole of a Cauldron. It's reasonable to think that the being from the Boundary called the Black Beast was also heavily influenced by the seithr."

"That information is extremely uncertain."

"It can't be helped. Nobody wants to get close to the Black Beast. And its remains that were left all over the place are not something you can carelessly approach."

To have one of the Ten Saints of the Magic Guild say that, he couldn't just easily dismiss it. What's more, many organizations had their hands full on dealing with the

damages caused by Black Beast. They weren't in the position to just settle down and begin an investigation.

And then by not having any decisive ability to oppose the Black Beast, they would just be in disarray when facing another one of the Black Beast's destruction. The vicious cycle happened on a global scale, with its end yet to be seen.

"Let's get back to the topic. See, the Boundary and the Black Beast are like a mass of seithr. Then, this pretentious thing is... used to halt the flow of the seithr."

With a stern expression, Nine looked at the exceptionally fascinating artifact.

Some kind of unrest drifted from her narrative tone. Naturally, Ragna and Celica's faces stiffened in nervousness.

"What will happen when the seithr's flow gets stopped?"

"It's simple. Basically..."

Nine sluggishly opened her mouth to answer Ragna's question.

But as her words were on their way out, another voice followed on instead.

"Basically... We will be able to stop the activities of the Black Beast."

For some reason, a hoarse male's voice could be heard from the room's entrance that was left open until now.

It wasn't the voice of the people in this room. Immediately after arriving to that conclusion, Ragna turned around and drew the sword from his waist.

But immediately, there was hesitation in the tip of that sword.

Nine had made the electronic panel short-circuited using her magic and caused the bulky metallic door unable to close. On the rectangular frame, a skinny man stood with his back leaning there.

With an unhealthy appearance, his skin was engraved with deep wrinkles, as if it were coated with them. The hair was also mixed with some white hair with its color faded away. Originally, his age should have been within his forties, or what had been said as the first half of the prime time of someone's life. But the atmosphere that was enveloping him had an unusual fatigue that made him appear to be an old man that had already gone past his sixties.

The figure wore dust-stained pants and a shirt with a slightly dirty white robe of top of it. ...It was like he had been secretly living for about six years within the deserted underground ruins.

His flat and narrow glasses were a bit bent with a small crack running. It somehow gave an impression of nervousness.

He was Shuuichirou Ayatsuki.

Ragna could hear the noise of Celica taking a breath beside him.

"...Father!?"

No sooner after she called him, Celica leaned forward and ran off. As she ran, she intensely stared at the figure in disbelief.

"Are you really... my father?"

His appearance was considerably different from what Celica remembered.

Although he had always looked unhealthy after he shut himself within a research institute, he never looked this morbid. Although he had a slender build, he was never so thin that he might get a fracture at any time. He might not have appeared youthful, but his eyes were never sunken so deep.

His appearance had completely changed too much for what six years could have done.

The white-robed and spectacled man took a gaze at the rushing Celica's body as if he were making sure of it. And then he clumsily raised his lips.

"...It seems I'm able to meet you once more. Looks like the heavens haven't abandoned me yet."

The pitiful and hoarse voice was of course different from what Celica remembered, but the somewhat cynical accent he passed was of her dearest father.

Even if he was unexpectedly old, he was unmistakably her father.

"Thank goodness. You're really alive... I'm so glad we're able to meet... I was always, always searching for you. But why? If only you had contacted me during all these six years... I'd have rushed to your place anytime..."

She had finally met him. The words of that thought were mixed with tears. It overflowed as she broke down.

Shuuichirou responded with a clumsy smile. However, his feeble body couldn't even raise his arm to caress her. Instead, his body sunk to the wall. He stared at the daughter with muddy eyes.

All the communication lines with the outside were cut off. The protective suit which purpose was to withstand the severe air pollution on the outside was entirely damaged.

The only means to reach the exit that was on the upper level part was only by staircase. But the exhausted Shuuichirou couldn't possibly climb it to the top.

At first, it was possible to pick up the radio signal from the outside. However, the nuclear attack erased the established signal.

For six years, nobody had come to rescue him, nor was he able to get out. He was always alone in the deep underground. Thinking of the loneliness, Celica's spine trembled with shivers.

"I'm glad... I was able to find you."

His loneliness should have ended now. Celica wiped her wet cheeks with her palms and made a bright smile to cheer up her father.

Relief. She felt the anxiety she had been holding was melting in relief. She thought that it was right for her to search for him after all.

From behind her, harsh words stormed in.

"Celica! Get away from that man!"

It was Nine. Celica turned around with a bewildered expression.

Those words were too much for someone who finally met her father. But Nine was completely serious, or rather she revealed her fierce hostility toward her father.

"Onee-chan...?"

"Come back here, right this instant. Do not approach that man."

"But why? He's really Father! He's alive!"

Celica went against the older sister's words and held her father's hand. The fingers on the completely dried up hand were stiff like a tree bark. But there was certainly warmth within the hardened muscles.

But clomping her heels, Nine walked toward them and roughly shook off their hands.

"Hey, you!"

As one would expect, thinking her action wrong, Ragna raised his voice in disapproval.

But he was silenced by a sharp glare from Nine.

"Get away from him!"

She yelled again. This time, she would not hear any argument and seized Celica's arm, separating it forcibly from the father. During that time, Nine stood between them as if protecting Celica.

Toward the stabbing, menacing attitude from Nine, Shuuichirou looked up and watched her with an annoyed gaze. His lips smiled.

"Konoe, huh..."

"Don't say my name so casually."

With unwavering hostility, Nine rejected her father.

"We undoubtedly finally meet again. I went through the trouble, so answer me. Six years ago, what kind of experiment did you do here? ...No, not that. Why did you create this object?"

The object Nine talked about was filling up the majority of the room's space. It was a nail that was covered in green patterns.

A while back, Shuuichirou said something about *being able to stop the activities of the Black Beast*.

Shuuichirou raised his blank eyes. He looked at the object that was peacefully sleeping. Then he moved his heavy, dried-up lips.

"...I've wondered if it might happen. We have failed. The object we've constructed was lost in the Cauldron... Instead, we've invited fear."

Once, the Takamagahara System had challenged God. Following it, an object was created with the purpose to supposedly directly interfere with the Boundary. However, what appeared was a monster that destroyed everything.

Shuuichirou's murmur made him as if he was thinking of something far away.

"It was certainly the Sheol Gate... According to what he said, what exists beyond it was probably hell. ...I was always terrified. What would happen if we were to fail...? Before I noticed, my mind was filled with nothing but that thought. Because of that possible moment, I have created something to hold back the flowing seithr from Boundary, and to shut the hole leading to it."

Shuuichirou lifted his stiff arms and stretched his hands toward said instrument.

"It was... this *Kushinada's Lynchpin*."

The object called the lynchpin that had unimaginably large strength silently stood beautifully. It was as if it was in deep slumber.

The hands that had stretched to the lynchpin fell down.

The back that had been leaning to the wall was slipping. Shuuichirou's thin, weak body sat down above the cold floor. His body was no longer holding up.

"FATHER!?"

Celica rushed and slipped through Nine's side. She kneeled beside her father. She knew it would only give her a temporary peace of mind, but Celica still put her hands on her father's chest and performed healing magic.

Celica possessed an exceptionally natural talent in healing magic. But still, she currently couldn't heal wounds that weren't visible. She couldn't heal illness. Furthermore, what was eating Shuuichirou's body wasn't an ordinary illness.

"...Quit wasting your magic. My body has been too exposed to a high concentration of seithr. It is too late to do anything about it."

It was seithr poisoning. Like how alkaline neutralized acid, seithr could neutralize harmful substances. But just like alkaline could be harmful when its concentration exceeded a certain limit, being exposed to too much seithr could also be poisonous to one's life.

"Perhaps, this is the end," Shuuichirou told his teary eyed daughter. He mustered his last strength toward the hand that had fallen once and placed it on Celica's shoulder.

"Listen well... Celica. My lynchpin could close that hole. That monster is strongly affected by the Boundary. It's only temporary, but it should be able to stop all of its activities."

"Fa-Father...?"

Suddenly, heat was coming from Shuuichirou's voice. Despite that his body was about to be depleted of his existence, only the hand that had been grabbing Celica's shoulder was strangely powerful.

It was like... he wanted to entrust something really important.

"I was always waiting for you. For you to come here, I was always..."

Growing impatient, Nine tried to separate the father's hand that had been grabbing her younger sister's shoulder.

But Shuuichirou's thin arm that had been stiffening until now wouldn't budge. Rather, because it absolutely wouldn't let go, his fingertips forcefully dug into Celica's shoulder.

"This is my final research. It needs your power for it to be completed. Your..."

"Release Celica!"

Nine yelled as if she were striking him. At the same time, as if knocked by the angry voice, Shuuichirou's body was slammed to the wall that was just behind him.

Unbelievably, her biological father was blown away by a shockwave.

Celica tried to blame her by saying that she had gone too far.

But before she could speak her discontent, a low laughter disturbed the cool air.

"Huhu... haha. My lynchpin will seal the monster he had dragged out. That ought to make my skill be considered having surpassed his..."

He was talking to himself. His body, which was being held by only his willpower, already couldn't be moved. With his helpless head leaning against the wall, Shuuichirou looked up at the ceiling and laughed.

Looking at her father who sounded so triumphant, anger and contempt mixed within Nine. Preventing her from touching him again, she forcibly pushed Celica behind.

As she got startled all of a sudden, Celica twisted her feet, but Ragna immediately held her.

Everyone hadn't separated their eyes from Shuuichirou.

"You're disgusting as usual. It isn't about anything like the world, humanity, or the Black Beast. You just want to show off the result from your research to that genius person, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm a scientist. Isn't that obvious? ...I was always frustrated. I was no match compared to that genius under any circumstances. He was undoubtedly the only necessary person for our research and experiments... I was no more than an extra."

The blood-related daughter despised him from the bottom of her heart. But she could no longer get through to Shuuichirou. He might have put his pride on top of his comprehension.

Shuuichirou's muddy eyes were fixed to the lynchpin, as if clinging to it.

"He had made a mistake. And then... I corrected that mistake. Using my lynchpin."

If his body were able to move, he probably would present both of his arms to the lynchpin and hug it.

Despite the hoarse voice being barely able to be understood, his trembling enthusiasm caused Ragna, Celica, Nine, and Trinity's nerves to convulse, as if he were holding their collars.

"Isn't it magnificent...? It is... My lynchpin is... the last option for... humanity..."

After his pale lips carved a smile, Shuuichirou ceased to move. Like an old man, his eyelids fell down before anyone knew it, snatching away the lynchpin from Shuuichirou's pupils.

But perhaps the brilliance from the divine figure had been burned at the back of his eyelids.

"...Father?"

After a little while, Celica called him with tearful voice. There was no response.

Celica tried to walk up to him with her aimless feet shaking. When it seemed she was about to fall, Ragna held her shoulder and pulled her.

"It's dangerous. Get hold of yourself."

Ragna knew that he had said something unreasonable. Truthfully, it seemed nothing would reach Celica's ears. Her trembling knees yielded down as they had lost their strength.

He hurriedly held her body that had collapsed to the floor with his arm, and supported her with his chest.

"Celi..."

Ragna didn't continue his words as he tried to call her. To begin with, he already couldn't remember what to say to her.

Celica's lips let out a helpless voice to call her father.

It might have been some kind of switch as tears were spilling from her wide eyes. Spilling, and overflowing.

"No... no way. Why...?"

She had finally met him. She had found him at last.

Her lifeless fingers were trembling as she strongly grabbed Ragna's clothes. It was like there was nothing to cling to other than that.

Ragna embraced Celica within his chest. If by any chance his hand were to be separated from her, he felt like Celica's figure would disappear instantly.

He fully knew that such a thing would never happen, but he couldn't help it. He probably just didn't want to look at her pale, tear-stained face.

As she was firmly enclosed within his arm, Celica's back began to tremble in her sobbing after a little while. She buried her forehead on Ragna's chest. She muttered as she held back her voice. Like how a small child did, she couldn't conceal her grief and started to cry.

Why? How come? I really have lots of things to say. I didn't search for you to speak about such a thing...

Ragna never lamented over the fact that his right arm couldn't be moved presently.

But if only it could be moved, even while supporting the crying Celica, he could have patted her head with the other hand.

Before anyone knew it, the hidden room that was deep within underground had regained complete silence.

A small sound rang as Trinity closed a thick notebook in her hand. Its black leather of a cover was crowded with writings on it. They were mostly reminders of someone's researches.

But occasionally, there were no dates or signatures, with small monologues put in between. Sometimes it was a trivial announcement of a decision, sometimes it was a complaint, and sometimes it was regret.

The contents were like short journals. Its owner, Shuuichirou Ayatsuki, wasn't able to tell it to his daughters. What was written were mostly predictions, and the truth.

Standing in for the uninvolved sisters, Trinity only investigated some parts of the monologues and read aloud what caught her eyes.

"...It seems originally, your father's research was initiated when a person named Relius Clover received a request."

Breathing out slowly, Trinity said a few words. It was then that time had finally moved for the first time in a long time.

For the whole time, Nine was silent, while Celica was crying.

In the midst of it, Celica finally stopped crying and sat down on the floor. Even then, she hadn't released Ragna's clothes. For now, she still clung to it with her head buried.

He didn't see a reason to separate her. Forced to keep sitting, Ragna looked up to Trinity with his posture still holding Celica.

"Was there a guy named Yuuki Terumi in there?"

"No~, didn't find any."

"Is that so..."

He felt disappointed since he had a little hope. Ragna had quite a history with him as the enemy. That name gave out a hidden presence that marked an important incident in history. Ragna had encountered him in a period approximately a hundred years to the future. However, he should have existed in this period, too, donning some kind of appearance.

To say the least, Yuuki Terumi was one of the Six Heroes who had defeated Black Beast...

(...Hm? Does that mean if I find Terumi and beat him during this current stage, the Black Beast won't be defeated?)

Ragna suddenly noticed. If that were the case, he couldn't afford to kill Terumi. History would change.

(Well... But for now...)

The purpose he came up with that he could do in this period was only Yuuki Terumi.

For now, rather than that, the girl who was desperately wiping her tears from her eyes was more important.

And then... about the Kushinada's Lynchpin that was silently enshrined.

"That Relius Clover must be the person that man was talking about."

Nine spoke as she separated her back from the wall. An anger that had its reason still yet to be understood by Ragna and the others strongly oozed out from her voice.

She wandered to the front of the lynchpin and then looked up at the gigantic object with her chin raised, as if challenging it.

"If you want to overcome your inferiority complex, then do something with just your own power... And yet, this thing...!"

With her anger stirred up, thunder appeared on Nine's hand. It largely expanded in just a blink of an eye. Before long, the sound of electric discharge filled up the atmosphere within the room. The measuring devices screeched as sparks scattered all over them.

"Hey! What are you trying to do!?"

Ragna raised his voice in a hurry. With her eyes locked on the Kushinada's Lynchpin, Nine didn't even look over to him.

"It should be obvious. This ridiculous junk has no worth in existing!"

"You... you can't, Onee-chan! Father went through trouble taking care of it! It might be able to stop the Black Beast!"

Weeping her eyes out, Celica raised her face and also yelled.

The hidden room which was built deep underground might not know about the damage from the Black Beast, but if one were to get out to the outside of the room for a moment, they would see deep scars regardless. If they were to go to the surface, they would be exposed to the dreadful appearance of a country that had been destroyed by an unidentified monster.

If the Black Beast's ferocious movements could be stopped, then any mankind would long for that miraculous means.

But Nine's back turned a deaf ear. The lightning sphere greatly raised.

Trinity prepared a protective magic in a hurry. Ragna reflexively held Celica to protect her.

The lightning was fired.

On the brink of it, a gale swiftly flowed.

"Wh...!?"

It wasn't clear if the raised voice toward the unusual phenomenon belonged to Ragna or Nine.

A distorted noise burned the air. The course of the fired lightning cluster that had been aimed at the lynchpin was abruptly changed to a wrong direction. In a diagonally upward angle, it smashed the room's ceiling and burst.

A noise of metal being torn off spread. The smokes from the explosion dragged the smashed soils and rained down within the room.

"Cough... cough. W-what?"

Celica lowered her body since she was seized by a fit of coughing while still being held by Ragna's arm. She once again choked painfully.

She didn't know the details of what had happened. But judging from the noise and situation, Nine's magic had been repelled. It didn't directly hit the lynchpin.

With her sleeve covering her mouth, Nine looked up from within the whirling up dust clouds. In the front of her, another presence lingered.

As his vision gradually became clearer, Ragna instantly recognized the intruder.

"Can't let ye destroy this fella."

A short build with the height that didn't even reach Ragna's chest and two tails that swayed. A gleaming Japanese sword that cut through the explosion's smoke.

The one who was standing there was Mitsuyoshi, with his wounded right eye covered in bandages.

As soon as he saw Mitsuyoshi's figure, Ragna spontaneously gasped. His memory was aching.

That person also had his right eye concealed by an eye patch. The side of his eye that was covered was the same as what Ragna's master, Jubei, had.

"Mitsuyoshi! Why the hell are you here...!?"

"Did ye forget, Ragna? Clavis was originally tryin' to get me to investigate this place. It shouldn't be strange fer me to be here."

With only his large left eye sharply focusing on Nine, Mitsuyoshi sneered in a friendly tone that didn't change in any way since the time when they were traveling together to Japan. But he didn't give any hint of friendliness as his hostility lit up.

"I've heard the story. Kushinada's Lynchpin... If its strength can stop the Black Beast, might as well start it up now."

His voice was calm, but he said it while the tip of his sword pointed to Nine threateningly.

The sudden intruder made Nine dumbfounded although she rarely did that. After she came to her senses, she carefully focused on her magic.

"And just when I thought someone fairly good-looking had appeared, you just had to say a selfish thing, didn't you? If you've heard the story, then you should have understood. I can't let that junk be activated."

"Why? Even ye should've known how messy the current world's situation is, Nine of the Ten Saints."

"You're an underling of the Alucard Family, right? Looks like senility has hit even Clavis Alucard."

Nine boldly answered back as she snorted.

Mitsuyoshi's face showed a faint discontent at the word senility.

"Answer my question. Are ye, one of the Ten Saints, seriously goin' to conceal the means to save the world just fer yer own selfish desire, even as a joke?"

Why did Nine detest Kushinada's Lynchpin so intensely? It wasn't just Mitsuyoshi's question, but everyone in this room, too.

"This isn't a means to eliminate that monster. It will only hold it back. The existence of the Black Beast will continue to remain."

"It's better than not usin' it. Humanity needs time. After escapin' from the Black Beast, the time won't be necessarily used to save victims, but to get the strength to fight against that monster."

The current humanity's technology could not oppose the Black Beast. The circumstances couldn't produce any kind of satisfaction.

But even if they got their hands on something, they didn't have the opportunity to organize it. Every country, every institution had their hands full in dealing with the damage caused by Black Beast.

And everyone thought about how to save anyone who stood beside them. If only there was a little time, then they wouldn't have to think about protecting.

"Just as Mitsuyoshi-san has said, I feel the same. If we don't do anything at this rate, humanity might perish. Even if the time is short, a person might be saved in the meantime."

Celica appealed while getting up by borrowing Ragna's hand.

"Father said that my power is needed to complete it. I'll do anything. I think it'll be wonderful if people throughout the world can live in peace even for a while."

Her swollen red eyes pointed directly at the older sister. Her voice was powerful, as if the sobbing from before was a lie.

Nine dropped her gaze as if avoiding her sister.

"Don't say such an absurd thing..."

Her fingers whitening as she clenched her fist beside her body.

As if his back was enduring something, Ragna also asked although he was hesitating.

"You seem to not want that device to be used no matter what. But why do you refuse it so much? If you're hiding something dangerous, then tell us. If you don't, then I won't be satisfied since I'm clueless. Mitsuyoshi and Celica also won't agree, y'know?"

"...Look here!"

Nine snapped at Ragna's question. With her long hair disheveled, Nine turned around. The glaring eyes that raised up looked like... they would burst into tears anytime soon.

"It is nothing but a decoration for now. It's meaningless to toss it to the Boundary as it is. Electricity and magic cannot reach it when it's inside the Boundary. And it needs some source of energy to keep it functioning. It also can't use instantaneous ones like explosion. That thing operates continuously in a constant pace. Something like batteries is not enough at all. Something larger, something that can be more easily controlled..."

"A source of energy with that much delicacy..."

Trinity became speechless mid-sentence. She had already guessed it.

But Ragna couldn't grasp what Nine was trying to say. He took a large step forward as he was frustrated.

"Quit talking in a circle! What is it!?"

"Don't you know?"

With hate, Nine spoke coldly. Her contempt wasn't directed at Ragna, but her father.

"...A human being."

The perceived sound felt like it made the mood grew cold rapidly.

With a voice that had its emotion killed, Nine continued on.

"A human soul is unstable, but it can have an unmatched adaptability when precisely programmed. Besides, even without something like a cable or electromagnetic wave for machine, or the user's mind for magic, it will be able to keep functioning as long as the human is still alive."

For it to work in an unknown territory called the Boundary, it had been stated that a human being was the most suitable as the instrument's energy.

For many years, Shuuichirou Ayatsuki had been researching about the technique for establishing a human's soul. The Kushinada's Lynchpin had to be the culmination of those researches. It was the first and the last finished creation to Shuuichirou Ayatsuki.

"However, the energy for the lynchpin cannot be any kind of human. Compared to anyone else, it has to be someone who excels in manipulating one's life force... For example, someone who's especially talented in using healing-type magic."

After Nine squeezed out the words as her heart tore to pieces, her mouth got locked shut.

"Ah."

Celica astonishingly let her voice out instead. The lightly gripped hand had its index finger peeked out. That gesture of pointing to herself was extremely unsuitable with the room's atmosphere.

"Could it be me?"

———*It needs your power for it to be completed. Your...*

In other words, that was the meaning of their father's last words.

"So basically..."

The time felt as if it stopped. In midst of it, Ragna managed to open his mouth once. His mind had yet to sort out everything.

"What was that? That Kushinada's Lynchpin uses people for fuel... What's more, it's worthless if it's not Celica. Like that?"

"...Rather than fuel, it's more like a key to start the engine."

From an early age, Celica had been endowed with healing power after previously taking lessons in magic theories. Shuuichirou Ayatsuki got a hold of that data and put it to use in studying the Boundary. And in the end, he utilized it as a part of the Kushinada's Lynchpin.

While cutting her words from time to time, Nine listlessly looked downward as she spoke. It sounded like she was hiding her emotions.

"Healing magic users are scarce. Someone as talented as Celica isn't exactly common. What it all comes down to is that man had planned make use of Celica when he made this."

"If the lynchpin is used, what'll happen to Celica?"

"When the inorganic substances are assimilated, her body won't be able to move. And gradually, her life will be whittled away. In the end, all will be exhausted."

Like the energy inside a battery that would eventually be depleted entirely, it would have no more use.

"And after Celica's life force is used up, as if nothing has happened, that monster will nonchalantly revive. Do you think I will allow that to happen!?"

The suddenly lashed out voice shook the atmosphere inside the room. Nine tightly gripped her fist still.

"If it's used, that's the same as saying you're presenting Celica's life. Even with that, does anyone still want to state their opinion to me?"

Her voice had a tension as it reverberated. Before long, no one replied. What broke the silence was the sound of Mitsuyoshi moving as he readied his katana.

"...Even so."

Strongly gritting his back teeth, Mitsuyoshi spoke as if he were squeezing the words out.

To say that the fixed tip of his sword was without hesitation was incorrect. There were troubles inside the dropped gaze that had been raised again.

"Even so, if the current situation keeps lastin', sooner or later everythin' will be finished. It's an end that has to be avoided completely. Humanity needs a chance... No matter what the sacrifice is."

Even if it was too heavy to carry that sacrifice.

Mitsuyoshi sternly furrowed his eyebrows. He shouted to shake off his own hesitation.

"THERE'S NO OTHER WAY!!"

Kushinada's Lynchpin was the last chance left for humanity.

One way to break out of the vicious cycle of defensive fight, they had to recover to go into the offensive.

She understood that. Nine deliberately repeated it as she stared at Mitsuyoshi as if challenging him.

"I'll fight even if this thing doesn't exist! Black Beast? Bring it on! I'll turn it to charcoals!"

"If that's possible, no one would be scared of the Black Beast's presence!"

Mitsuyoshi was seriously planning to defeat the Black Beast. Even if he lost his life, it would still be okay if the world was saved. But the reality was different. The remnant only expanded for a little bit. Neither hands nor legs came out.

The Black Beast wasn't a fighting opponent that could be confronted squarely by humans and beastkins.

"...I understand that ye cherish yer sister. Still... when the world meets its downfall without recoverin', are ye just goin' to say that there ain't any other way!?"

The lynchpin wasn't only affecting Celica's life. It also held the choice of risking life throughout the world.

If the lynchpin couldn't only need Celica's life and were fine with everybody else's, Mitsuyoshi would offer himself. Nine would also do the same.

Therefore, Mitsuyoshi said the right thing while Nine was wrong.

"...I won't allow for Celica to be sacrificed."

Nine strongly bit her lips as she hoisted her supple hands.

"If you're absolutely doing it, then I will eliminate you even by force!"

Nine's magic ability was considered to be the best in the world. Within the white hand, a powerful magic coiled up a vortex. Presently, a pure mass of energy transformed and brought forth a light orb.

Nine pointed it toward Mitsuyoshi without any hesitation. Just before the light approached Mitsuyoshi, it burst into countless light bullets as it rained down.

"Tch... can't be helped. I won't back down easily!"

Clearing away several of the light bullets, Mitsuyoshi skillfully twisted his body to avoid it.

A few of the light bullets hit the lynchpin's body. It made Nine chuckle and Mitsuyoshi bitter-faced. However, the small lights had merely done a single scratch on the magnificent silver and green objet d'art.

"Hmph. As expected from something that's dealing with the Boundary, it's unbelievably sturdy."

The annoyed Nine spoke bitterly. This time, she created blades of void. The target was Mitsuyoshi. If he came in contact with the invisible blades, his flesh would be torn while his bones would be severed.

But Mitsuyoshi could see the direction of the wind blades as he leaped. He easily jumped over it and then approached Nine.

"If ye don't want to get hurt, pull yer hands!"

"Don't take me lightly!"

The tip of the sharp katana seized Nine. But just before it thrust in her throat, Nine enveloped her surroundings with electricity.

"WHOA!?"

The sparks repelled the katana. As if kicking the air, Mitsuyoshi twisted his body. Although his balance was a bit off, he landed back to where he was. He quickly fixed his posture as he muttered bitterly.

"As one would expect from one of the Ten Saints. Not only the magic strength, but the speed of its deployment's also in a different league."

"Same goes to you. If one thought that you were just a cute cat, one will be in for a world of pain."

Their respective ability was more than they had expected. But neither Mitsuyoshi nor Nine could withdraw.

"Onee-chan! Mitsuyoshi-san!"

Since both of them went into their battle stance again, Celica tried to prevent it with a flustered voice. But it couldn't reach their ears. They didn't even glance toward Celica.

"I... cannot abandon the world!"

"I won't let anyone make use of Celica!"

Stating their declarations together, Mitsuyoshi's katana and Nine's shockwave clashed.

The impact made the room lightly vibrate. Despite that, the room was deep underground.

Suddenly, Ragna remembered.

It was an event before the Dark War that wouldn't fail to be mentioned when talking about it. Destruction had been driven away from humanity as the Black Beast once suddenly ceased its activity for a period of one year.

In the meantime, humanity reorganized the crumbling order and established sufficient preparation to face the Black Beast.

And then when the Black Beast began to be active once again, having a backup from a new kind of strength built by humanity, six heroic people eliminated the apparition that had threatened the world.

(A one year gap ...)

Historically, the cause was unknown.

(Was it the Kushinada's Lynchpin?)

When Celica got absorbed to the lynchpin, the Boundary would be sealed. That was why for one year, the black apparition couldn't move.

...Was that the truth of the history?

Ragna couldn't believe it. With disbelief, he looked at Celica.

Near him, someone powerless frustratingly bit her lips as her heart was crushed by Mitsuyoshi and Nine's fight.

Did this girl's life save humanity...?

In Ragna's vision, Celica's hair swung violently. She broke into a run.

Ragna caught her arm. Since it was so sudden, he was a bit rough.

"Ragna!"

With a disapproving look, Celica looked back.

In a short distance away, Mitsuyoshi was jumping around while clearing away Nine's fired light arrows. The sound of the clashing metals were reverberating brutally.

In order for Celica to stop both of them, she intended to put herself between them. Ragna forcefully pulled the arm he caught as he sighed in his amazement.

"At any rate, what do you think you can do by yourself? It's dangerous, y'know."

"But!"

She loathed such a situation. The big sister she loved very much and Mitsuyoshi who she felt indebted to. She didn't want anyone to get wounded.

For some reason, Ragna picked it up and understood Celica's feeling that was like a prayer. It was very easy to imagine that this girl was surely thinking like that.

"I know. You want to stop them."

"Eh...?"

"Next time, tell me when such a time comes."

Soon after he spoke, Ragna set up the blade of the thick sword and pulled it backward considerably. Putting all of his might, he threw it so it was mowing down horizontally.

"URAAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

As it made a boisterous noise, Ragna's sword rotated in high speed as it drew a large arc, splitting up the space between Nine and Mitsuyoshi.

"What the!?"

"Tch...!"

Right under his nose, Mitsuyoshi used his katana to repel it. A heavy noise rang out as the sword's trajectory was disturbed. After a few rotations, the tip of the sword got buried in the floor.

Both Mitsuyoshi and Nine stepped aside until they were close to the wall. In the meantime, Ragna's sword was stuck as if it were some kind of a symbol.

"Okay, stop!"

Ragna quickly walked to his favorite sword's location. In the middle of it, he put in awe to his voice as he raised it.

"Y'all are much stronger than normal, so don't you go wild with full strength. In the first place, no matter who'll win the brawl, isn't the one who decides what to do Celica, not you people?"

He gripped the handle which faced the ceiling and pulled it up. The metallic floor was coming along too, but he tore it off by pinning it down with his feet.

Nine was silent. Mitsuyoshi awkwardly lowered his katana.

"...I understand what you've all been saying. But for now, calm down a bit. That goes for Nine and Mitsuyoshi. Also Celica."

There didn't seem to be any composure in everyone's feelings. Ragna himself was also included.

Frankly, it was a bit confusing. Putting Celica to Kushinada's Lynchpin. Was that choice the reality of what had happened? Or did humanity find another way?

As an existence that had lived in the future, he shouldn't change the history.

However... for such a thing like offering Celica to the Boundary in this place, he couldn't even consider it.

Trinity calmly stepped forward.

"I also think it's good to do just as that~. I'll make some warm tea, so let's get a little rest. After all... so much stuff happened today~. Okay?"

Ragna felt a deep gratitude for Trinity since she was here in such a time like this. The girl's meek demeanor gently wrapped the broken tension.

"...Yeah."

As if urging her older sister and Mitsuyoshi, Celica innocently smiled and jogged over to Trinity. Looking at it alone, it was hard to believe that her life had control over the fate of the world.

Slowly, the freezing mood started to melt.

Mitsuyoshi restored his sword. Covering her sharp glints with her eyelids, Nine crossed her arms under her chest.

In reality, perhaps no one had come at a conclusion. Looking at the scene in the room, Ragna spontaneously thought so. Even if it was for the sake of the world, such a thing as offering someone he knew as a sacrifice no matter what was ridiculous.

———.

"...Ah?"

Ragna looked around while frowning his eyebrows.

Hearing a tiny voice escaping from him, Trinity tilted her head in a wonder.

"Something's wrong?"

"No, just now..."

Someone called him.

As he thought so, the voice could be heard again.

———*Ragna.*

It was clear this time. He realized it. It wasn't the case that it came from somewhere. Someone was speaking directly into his mind.

That was why Celica and Nine, also Trinity and Mitsuyoshi couldn't hear it.

It seemed she only had business with Ragna.

"...I'm gonna go outside a bit."

As of now, he hesitated to one-sidedly continue the talk in this place. Ready to be doubted, Ragna went toward the door with a broken electronic lock.

"Where are you going?"

Sure enough, Nine called him with a cautious voice. With his hand placed on the door's frame, Ragna's feet stopped. Again, he looked back. He didn't know if any kind of excuse would be enough for her.

"...I'm just gonna cool off my head. Be back soon."

Dodging her question with an ordinary excuse, he left the thin, lengthy corridor and turned back to the underground cave where the Cauldron resided.

Chapter 6: Promised Azure

Deep underground, the Cauldron with its mouth opened had its somewhat cool heat drifting upward. Presently, an unexpectedly solemn mood enveloped it.

Even if the illuminations from the connected metals the people had especially made weren't turned on, the overwhelming red flame was enough to get a good view.

Just how deep was the Sheol Gate burrowed within it?

With the flame being projected around the vicinity of his vision, Ragna stopped the feet that had been slowly moving forward.

He looked around. Looking for the owner of the voice from before.

He knew whose voice it was. A sweet voice with youth and bewitchment mixed in.

"You're here, right...? Rachel!"

Ragna's voice vanished as it was absorbed by the tall ceilings. An existence that had surpassed mankind was looking down from somewhere, probably digging up for some entertainment.

As the air flowed, a sweet aroma tickled Ragna's nose. It was the fragrance of roses.

Ragna looked over his shoulder with his mouth distorted. His sharp canines stood out like bare fangs.

"There, huh? Don't look down on people."

On a part of bare bedrock with the wallboards peeled off, as if she was sitting, she had her small legs crossed. A young girl clad in a black dress was floating.

"It has been a long time."

With an innocent voice, she smiled. The young girl was surrounded by winds that had a rose fragrance. Then she elegantly stood up.

The Cauldron's illumination, enriched with bright-red light, carved a shadow from the young girl's ribbons. The silhouette looked like a rabbit.

Ragna felt that something was out of place in her appearance.

2106 AD. The Rachel Alucard in this period should have still been a child and not yet acquainted with Ragna. But young appearance or not, did she have an unusual air of a know-it-all like the Rachel Alucard who stood before Ragna now had?

"Fufu," said her as a fingertip touched her small lips. Rachel had revealed a grown-up laughter that felt inappropriate.

"You are such a fool. Where do you think we are? ...We are currently near the Boundary."

With just that, she spoke as if it contained all the reasons for it. But surely it wasn't convincing enough for him.

This location was closer to the Boundary compared to any other place.

As if dragging out Ragna's lost memories, Rachel's existence must have made all information he had obtained flowing into him again.

Basically, the 'Rachel' Ragna was confronting now was the 'Rachel' from his period. She was the same as the one in the information which his memories carried.

"What kind of business bothered you to call me? You know this already, but I'm kinda busy right now."

"Of course. I'm confident that it's about Kushinada's Lynchpin. The mankind in this era certainly created something intriguing."

"You saw everything, huh?"

She probably watched the arguing when Shuuichirou Ayatsuki passed away and the encounter with Hakumen before it. It didn't feel too nice being constantly monitored from somewhere.

"Good timing. Since you're the Rachel Alucard I know, I got something for you to hear."

Her bright red eyes urged him to proceed.

"During the Dark War, there should have been a time when the Black Beast didn't appear for about a year."

If Ragna's knowledge wasn't wrong, it was in 2107 AD. Just in a year, humanity had been given a recess.

"Was that... the Kushinada's Lynchpin's doing?"

Carefully, Ragna deliberately examined Rachel's facial expression.

The elegant little girl swiped her bangs with her fingers and looked at a distance. It was difficult to look for her real motive and intention from her plain, expressionless face.

"I wonder that myself."

"Anyhow, you know it, don'tcha? Don't be such a stuck-up."

Unable to hide his irritation, Ragna drew closer. At that, Rachel's young eyes looked at him as she smiled.

"You are surprisingly desperate about it. What could be the reason?"

"Huh? I'm not talking about that right now."

"Do you feel bothered regarding the child that's about to become a sacrifice of the lynchpin? What a devotion."

Rachel's tone of voice which contained amazement had tiny thorns like what a rose had.

Ragna drew his eyebrows close. Her mocking attitude ticked his irritation.

"I said, it doesn't matter now!"

"Naturally, you should not exist in this period. Even without your doing anything, this period will turn history by its choices."

As If pouring cold water to the impatient Ragna, Rachel coldly told him. Her overseeing red pupils that were looking up at him made Ragna take a deep breath as he reflexively extinguished his vigor.

"...And yet, are you still denying it?"

The whisper penetrated the gap within his heart like it was nothing.

It was as if her eyes were testing him.

Ragna held his breath for a moment. He stared at the young vampire, challenging her.

"What can I do?"

There should be something. He recalled Clavis' words.

There must be a duty he had to accomplish in this period, guided by fate. He wasn't planning to feign romanticism, but presently, he couldn't help thinking as if those words were an undeniable truth.

And if the duty really existed... he felt that it would be now.

He wanted it to be now.

Dropping her cynical gaze from that sort of Ragna, Rachel's feet slowly hovered from the ground. She then nimbly approached the Cauldron.

"First, I will show you the possibility."

With the floating tiptoes facing the Boundary, Rachel stood as if she was a needle of a clock. She held her small hand above the swirling lava and looked down on it silently.

"This is the year of 2106 AD, the period which will be called as the Dark War by the life to come. It was the era when humanity had to confront a downfall crisis since the Black Beast had appeared from the Boundary."

Rachel's fingertip moved smoothly as if she were tracing something.

"Thus the time flowed, and it became 2200 AD, the time when you lived in. The Black Beast had been felled in the past, and it became the period when people were safe and prospering."

The black dress fluttered above the Cauldron. Rachel turned around to face Ragna.

Either the soaring magic or the wind she had manipulated made her golden hair and big ribbons sway.

"This is the tale of the beginning, *Phase 0*. No one is able to intervene with this tale. ...But for one thing, there is an exception for the existence that had slipped in. As an indispensable existence in this period, if that outsider comes into contact with the Black Beast, what do you think will happen?"

When that kind of situation really happened, what would occur? Nobody knew. Of course, so did Rachel.

Therefore, it was not an answer. It was no more than a possibility.

"You are not a person of this period. Therefore, it is fine for you to remain a spectator while the history is being drawn. You know that your intervention is unnecessary, yet you can still challenge it. ...The choice is yours to choose. However... please remember well the time when you received that sword."

While listening to Rachel's words, Ragna glanced around himself, as if pulling something to him. What he was staring at was the direction of the dark solid bedrock. What couldn't be seen from here was the hidden room where the lynchpin slept in.

What was there was the figure of a girl. It floated within his mind.

A girl who had never doubted people, and never considered the consequences. She helped a suspicious person who was collapsed and dying. She helped the wild animals which were attacked by him.

She said that she was searching for her father. She confidently bragged about her family members.

Indeed, it didn't mean that the family members' humanity wasn't questionable, but he felt that they were a great family.

To unhesitatingly call that family as her family with affection, he felt jealous about it.

"Aah, that's right."

Returning his gaze from the hidden room back to Rachel who was above the Cauldron, Ragna curled his lips into a fearless smile.

"No need to choose. You knew it even if I didn't say it, you wicked rabbit."

"As usual, your etiquette is unbecoming."

Retorting back with sarcasm thrown, Rachel dropped her gaze once again. The expression that floated on her for an instant resembled a pouting child displaying her disappointment.

As Ragna had said, she knew it from the beginning. And then...

"...And then I will only observe, as always."

She dropped to a faint murmur.

The choice that Ragna would choose when thinking about that single girl. Although she knew it without needing to hear it, it didn't feel interesting for a bit.

But she wasn't childish enough to be unhappy. Rachel had enigmatic light within her red pupils again. Slowly, her chin rose.

"...It seems I cannot stay for too long. It will arrive soon."

Like descending from a stage, Rachel got down from above the Cauldron to face Ragna.

The impression from the manner of her words made Ragna lower his eyebrows.

"Arrive? What will?"

"It will be clear before long."

With a graceful smile that was carved on the red lips, Rachel once again kicked the floor. Like flower petals dancing in the wind, she soared. She floated to the same place where she was in the beginning and looked down on Ragna.

"...Until the end, please do well to keep me entertained while I'm at my own place."

Shaking the halted time, a wind carrying rose fragrance danced. Taking along the fragrance that induced dizziness, the little figure of Rachel disappeared.

From the warm tea Trinity brewed, slightly thin white steam rose.

After she drank the tea that was poured into a small cup by half, Celica raised her hips after it had been sitting on the cold floor. She put the cup down.

Ahead of where her feet were facing was the Kushinada's Lynchpin. On its cold silver body there were green patterns engraved on it. Her palm touched and stroked it gently.

Near a wall bit away from her, Nine, who was still reluctant to drink her tea, quickly got on her feet.

"You know."

The agitated Mitsuyoshi had desired to activate the lynchpin right away. Toward the older sister who held back him back, she calmly began to talk.

"I love Onee-chan very much. ...I can't talk to him anymore, but I also love Father. Also to Mitsuyoshi-san and Trinity. Not to forget everyone in the Magic Guild and the neighbors who had helped me in the past. ...Ragna, too. I love them all."

Pulling the affections from the bottom of her heart, Celica talked as if she were speaking to the lynchpin. As her other hand accompanied the previous hand, her eyebrows drew close together.

"Not only humans. Also to the house where I live together with Onee-chan and the cake shop where I sometimes go out for tea to. Even if it's no longer a country, Japan is a special place. The seashore promenade where I talked together with Ragna was also a pretty place. The sky and the sea, too. I also love the trees, grass, and flowers very much. Even for the stray dogs which were living inside the forest with their might, I'd surely love them if we had been together."

What Celica was trying to say was somehow conveyed to Nine, Mitsuyoshi, and Trinity.

For Nine, her speech made her very unhappy. But she couldn't figure out a good way to interrupt Celica's voice that was really gentle.

As if humming a love song, Celica continued.

"As I thought, I don't want to get anyone hurt. I don't want everything that I love get wounded, even if it's only one of them. If I have a way that I can do to at least save many lives... I want to do it."

"Do you realize what you're saying?!"

Once it became unbearable, Nine spoke to shake it off.

"Once you become a part of that lump of metal, you'll be alone forever within the Boundary, which has no one there. However, your consciousness won't cease. With that condition, you will endlessly continue to feel your life being shaved away...!"

Even that was nothing but a guess. Nobody had done experimentation or anything resembling it. There might be a pain. It might be unbelievably painful. But when that time came, it would be completely impossible to stop it midway in order to free her.

"Once you assimilate with the lynchpin, you cannot return to your original form again. You will cease to be a human being. Come on, do you really understand it!?"

"I think I do."

Nine's desperation was futile as Celica easily nodded.

And then a bit of sadness clouded her eyes.

"...I'm sorry, Onee-chan. I'm sure Onee-chan is really sad."

"Of course I am..."

Nine's voice flickered. "How could this happen...?" said Nine as her lament resounded.

Presently, Nine's heart was drowning in regret. If only she didn't get moved by her younger sister's disobedience and bring her over to the First District, something like the Kushinada's Lynchpin wouldn't be noticed by anyone's eyes. No matter what happened, it wouldn't be noticed by Celica's eyes.

She would have been relieved even if she had to bring her back forcibly.

With her skirt's hem waved, Celica turned around. Leaning her back to the lynchpin, she faced her older sister. Her expression was a mess, she seemed to be laughing and crying at the same time.

"It's not that I'm not scared. While I'm hanging on, people around the world will get a full sleep and eat plenty of meals. I think it'll be good if everyone can have a lot of discussion and do their best together. ...If that's the case, even the Black Beast will surely be defeated."

It wasn't a prayer or a wish. Celica believed it.

If she could help to reach it, then it would be wonderful for Celica.

"That's why I want to activate Kushinada's Lynchpin."

"———I thought you'd say something like that."

Immediately after Celica nodded to assure herself, as if brushing away her words, an amazed sigh came at the same time with the voice.

Celica turned her head. She discovered Ragna at the room's entrance as he came back unnoticed. Her face became a bit awkward.

"If only you came back just a little later, I might have finished talking..."

"What? You can't finish it if I'm here?"

"That's not it. But if Ragna's nearby... My determination will grow dull."

As she complained by sighing, Celica revealed her real motive.

"You're surprisingly not that resolved, ain't you?"

"Ahaha. It will be lonely when I can't be together with Ragna."

Ragna's cheeks spontaneously slackened.

No matter how many times Celica thought about it, she herself must have beem troubled about the hard decision. An emotion welled up within Ragna's existence because she looked like a helplessly naïve girl.

Ragna walked to where Celica was.

While he was on his way, he pushed the listlessly standing Nine's shoulder, entrusting the girl with her head hung to Trinity.

As expected, the gigantic lynchpin looked quite majestic by looking at the proximity. With that sort of magnificent design, the atmosphere it put on was overwhelming. For that very reason, he couldn’t be certain if it was really created by the hands of man.

"Sorry for the determination you've built up, but it's already no use to talk about the Kushinada's Lynchpin."

While looking up at the lynchpin, Ragna spoke like it was nothing.

Since his tone was too light, Celica couldn't comprehend what he said right away.

"Huh...? Eh, wait, what? What do you mean?"

"Like I said, it's no use to talk about stopping the Black Beast using this stuff. And isn't it weird? Let's say you become a sacrifice and protect the world for the sake of people valuable to you. But on the other hand, will that really be a happy world for the people you feel important?"

Since the people she protected wouldn't actually be delighted with the peace, would it be meaningless? At the very least, Nine wouldn't welcome a future without Celica. With Celica already gone, perhaps peace wouldn't ever visit her.

Besides, at any rate, Celica wanted to smile in relief seeing the world she loved so much being peaceful.

Ragna began to speak as natural as possible.

"There's another way to stop the Black Beast. And we don't have to use Kushinada's Lynchpin."

"What's wrong all of a sudden? You found something outside?"

"Nah. ...I just remembered."

Ragna dodged the question from the dumbfounded Celica by scratching his head. He had found a way from his lost memory by chance. Since it was going to be complicated talking about his conversation with Rachel that was in front of the Cauldron, he wanted to leave it behind if he could.

"What's the other way?"

It seemed Celica was still not fully satisfied. With an examining gaze, she looked up at Ragna while she asked him.

"Aah... I can't tell too much of the details. Anyway, I just have to get close to the Black Beast."

He had no idea about what he should do specifically.

Just by being directly near the Black Beast, some kind of phenomenon should occur. After all, like the Black Beast, the Ragna in this period was an existence that had come from the Boundary.

But since his words were ambiguous, the anxious Celica looked up at him with her eyebrows raised up in a miserable look.

"Does that mean Ragna will become a sacrifice on my behalf?"

"Not like that. I'll charge in, and then get back. Only that."

He really didn't have the slightest idea of it, so he would just leave it at that.

But Celica's face grew more anxious. She took a step closer to Ragna and tightly gripped the sleeve of Ragna's jacket.

"You'll never be able to get close to the Black Beast! You won't leave unscathed... If you're careless...! "

He would die.

The Black Beast was a symbol of destruction. Those who approached it had been destroyed entirely.

"I'm fine. I'll do it properly. I don't want Ragna get exposed to danger again!"

"You're such an idiot."

Toward Celica who looked up at him as if she were clinging to him, Ragna lightly hit her head. A clunk noise could be heard.

"Ouch."

"I, Nine, and everyone else are all the same. Nobody feels like sacrificing you. That's why I came up with an alternate plan."

Compared to the Kushinada's Lynchpin Shuuichirou had left behind, the alternate plan felt uncertain as it had no theory backing on it. But if it went smoothly, it would be for the best. No, it had to go smoothly.

Squinting his dazed eye, Ragna looked at Celica. In fact, Celica was sparkling. She didn't have any ill will. She never learned about hostility. She didn't embrace malice. She was pure, foolish, and innocent. That was why...

"...I've got a younger brother and sister."

Ragna spoke with a whisper-like voice.

Every time he exchanged glance between Celica and Nine, some part in his head ached. After he remembered something, it became all the more painful.

"Both of them said they love me. There was a time when I thought they were troublesome. But just like you to your big sis, they're still important to me. ...But I couldn't protect them."

As if he chewed on it, a bitter taste spread within his mouth. He recalled it clearly. It was a memory of a beginning that shouldn't be forgotten.

"So that's why, let me protect you this time."

He wanted to believe that he had enough strength to protect the people he wished to protect. He was different from his absolutely powerless self during that time. What would be the consequence was less important.

He had enough of getting down on his knees, unable to do anything.

Ragna put his hand on Celica's head.

"One other thing. You take it lightly, but losing the brother and sister you're supposed to protect is pretty hard. Something like bond that's left within yourself will pull you apart forever."

"..."

Just as her pupils became wet, Celica saw her older sister.

Cuddling close together with Trinity, Nine motionlessly watched over Celica and Ragna's conversation.

She was a big sister who always looked dignified, powerful, attractive, strong-willed while also beautiful. But only now her shoulders looked thin. Moreover, the girl appeared to be fragile.

"Celica, didn't you also say it back then? If you have a power to do something, then you'll use it protect... And so am I. I want you to smile."

"I also..."

Since her throat chocked, Celica strained it to bring her voice out.

"I also want Ragna to smile."

"Then it's decided. I'll do something to that monster. And since I'll return later, everything will be settled, won't it?"

"Ragna..."

Transparent drops of water floated on Celica's big eyes.

But Ragna ruffled Celica's head and disturbed her hair. Wiping the drops from the corner of her eyes with her fingertips, Celica did a big nod with a cheerful smile that was similar to the time when he first saw it.

By the time the conversation came to an end, it was already late. The surface was completely confined in the dead of night.

As Japan was a land without people inhabiting it, naturally, there wouldn't be a place to rent or lights to illuminate the street at night. Taking that into consideration, they were going to pass the time until dawn in the underground research facility as it felt rather accommodating.

Though, there wasn't anything that could substitute a futon. Because of it, if they spread their mantles and jackets on the usual hidden room's floor, they should have been able to sleep.

Inside the room, Trinity again brewed new tea. After Ragna refused it, he went out of the room to stroll a bit.

Even if he said he wanted to stroll around, the place where he was going was a hall with the Cauldron's surroundings stretched. Close to the mortar-shaped cave, there was a thin, dull staircase that went on for a distance.

Ragna stood near the Cauldron again, inevitably with no light above him. This time he wasn't searching for Rachel, but to take a peek of its contents.

"Boundary, eh...?"

He muttered for some reason. He couldn't even guess what on earth the Boundary was or where it connected to. It was unthinkable to drown anyone inside it.

If... assuming that nothing would happen when Ragna approached the Black Beast, would Celica make use of that lynchpin?

He didn't want to consider it. But even if by any chance he wasn't successful, he would rather have to choose an even more different alternative than having the lynchpin as the last resort.

"Eh, I'll just do something and it should be over in no sweat..."

Then, she was there.

"Do you have a moment?"

With a distinct voice, Nine spoke to him.

In contrast with her tone that felt really strong-willed, her constantly sharp, intimidating gaze was wandering around as if searching for something.

"I believe I have something I've yet to say."

"About what?"

"...About Celica. Thank you for stopping her wish."

She muttered while standing alone.

Ragna spontaneously grinned. It felt creepy.

"That's so unlike you."

"Oh, shut up. Even I want to express my gratitude properly for once. Especially... since this time I thought it was already hopeless."

While she rapidly told her reply, Nine brushed up her hair in her annoyance.

"Back then, that child never listened whenever she was reminded. She went out alone even when I had warned her so many times. Although I wanted her to do what I told her, in the end, it became just like that in spite of everything."

Looking at today's case of searching her father, he understood enough of it. "She's an astonishing girl," said Nine as she also gazed at the Cauldron from beside Ragna.

"I wonder why she listens if it's coming from you. It makes me sick."

"Hell if I know."

Ragna shrugged his shoulders. Nine boringly looked at that gesture with a sidelong glance and dropped her shoulders with a sigh.

"...It's going to be okay, right?"

"Ah?"

"The 'alternate plan' you said. Can it really able to constrain the Black Beast?"

"Maybe."

Unsatisfied with Ragna's answer, Nine expression grew bitter.

"You're not confident?"

"Not that, or else I wouldn't say it. But..."

Suddenly, Ragna intensely frowned while glaring at the Boundary. He was reminded of the history of the Dark War that was commonly known when he was a child.

"If it turns out well, I've got a favor to ask you."

"Me?"

Ragna knew something that no one else knew. Nine and Mitsuyoshi, who probably changed his name to Jubei for some reason, would defeat Black Beast. Furthermore, the Six Heroes named Nine had one more accomplishment.

"The Black Beast will be stopped of its activities for maybe a year."

This time, it was Nine who frowned after Ragna distinctly told his statement.

"How do you know about that?"

"Many reasons. I've got my own circumstances too, y'know?"

As one would expect, saying he came from the future would made it too suspicious. Hence he decided to pass on it. He didn't have anything to say to make up for it, so Ragna turned around his whole body to face Nine.

As if she was lured in, Nine also changed the direction of her body.

"One year. During that time, get the strength needed for humanity to battle the Black Beast. A further delay probably isn't gonna happen."

The green eye that was only on his left side was reflecting the color of the Boundary's lava. Receiving the heavy, straightforward gaze that had agony in it, Nine slowly nodded as if she gulped.

"One year, eh. Okay."

"And one more thing. ...Watch out for the guy named Yuuki Terumi."

"Yuuki Terumi? Who's he?"

Puzzled, Nine's eyebrows drew closer. Ragna lightly shook his head.

"I also don't know in details, but..."

"...You have a reason, huh? Fine, I give my promise to both."

As if burning, the strong light of Nine's determination was brimming in her pupils. Since it looked surprisingly trustworthy, Ragna sighed in relief, together with a smile.

Instead, Nine quickly continued on.

"You, too. Do your best in trying not to make what you've said just now as your last wish. If you make Celica cry, I won't forgive you."

"O-Okay."

The threatening tone of voice she had used was as if to say that she would kill him the moment he made her cry.

Somewhat backing out, Ragna greatly pulled his chin. He believed that about half of it came from his reflexes.

"...Hm?"

Suddenly, Nine grimaced. Not at Ragna, but something else. She kept an eye on the vicinity.

The atmosphere surrounding her went sharp.

"Nine?"

"Be quiet. I'm sensing... something."

As Ragna's wariness switch also turned on, he examined the surroundings. He didn't grasp what Nine was talking about.

Thanks to magic, Nine's current perception was upped to about the double of a normal person's. That's right. Just about as high as a beastkin's.

Mitsuyoshi rushed out in a hurry from the passage leading to the hidden room.

"Ragna! Nine!"

No sooner than when he discovered them, he raised his voice that had also been exposed to wariness.

It was an unusual situation. Urged by Nine's gaze, Ragna hurriedly rushed over together with her to where Mitsuyoshi was.

"What's wrong? Something happened?"

"Yeah. I dunno exactly what... A terrible an' awful presence's gettin' closer. Also, it's doin' it with an unusual speed."

"Terrible and awful...?"

As it was too vague, Ragna's thoughts merged to do his best to imagine something horrible.

For example, a black mist———.

"Everyone! Come here!"

This time, Celica hurriedly called them from the room's entrance.

Ragna and the others went back as if striving to be the first.

Within the elliptical-shaped room with a part of its ceiling hollowed, Trinity was overcome with surprise while she was in front of a magic circle that emerged on the floor. From the magic circle, a thin veil-like light was shining in the shape of upside-down cone. The spectacle above the ground was projected on it.

"Everyone, look..."

Although the floating image in the magic circle was pale, Trinity was adjusting it. Everybody lined up beside her.

The scene they were seeing was dark. It was natural since it was night.

No, that was wrong.

"This is...!"

Ragna gasped. It wasn't dark because it was night. The screen was gradually dyed in black. From the ground, an object of black mist fiercely gushed out and enshrouded the vicinity.

This kind of scene had had been witnessed. It wasn't only for Ragna, but also Celica and Mitsuyoshi. It was during the appearance of the lump of mist they had encountered in a research facility they had visited first when searching for Shuuichirou.

However, the scale didn't match to the one at that time.

"It can't be...!?"

Bewildered, Mitsuyoshi groaned in a hoarse voice. His two tails were seemingly appeared thickly swollen.

The mist in the image which Trinity projected became denser and denser as it gathered. Before long, it became an enormous lump and overcrowded the image.

As the discharged magic became disturbed, the image then vanished.

But there was no need to do it again to get a confirmation.

"———It's the Black Beast."

It was not a remnant.

A sinister sound was heard far away at the surface.

All of them unconsciously directed their gaze to the ceiling.

Accompanied by an enormous quantity of seithr mass, the Black Beast was... facing this way.

Rushing out to the Cauldron hall again, Ragna looked up at the lid-like opening that should be far away above his head.

The fact that it was far and that the area of the Cauldron's vicinity was brighter somehow made it hard to see the opening. Only a widespread of deep darkness could be seen.

Still, when he properly adjusted his eye, the enveloping darkness above him gradually dissolved at a fast rate. What should have been able to be seen that was covered by light became clear.

There was no room for doubt.

It was during the moment they thought so. On a part of the hall far away from where Ragna's group at, illuminated by the lights that came from the Cauldron, a noise that was like a gushing steam began to reverberate.

What had been spewing was black mist.

"It's coming...!"

Nine put herself on guard. Magic was swirling around her.

While stretching out his sensitivity at his surroundings, Ragna shook his head as lightly as he could.

"No, it's impossible. Run."

When he muttered, sweat ran down on his back. His throat went dry at the unusual tension.

Nine snapped at the withdrawing figure.

"Huh? What do you mean by running away!?"

"No time for complaining. Nine, can you do teleportation?"

"Wh... Kuh, teleportation? It's not that I can't. Something that easy..."

Ragna's low but strong tone of voice seemed authoritative. It made Nine slightly flinch when she replied. Why did she have to be ordered by Ragna? It made her disgruntled. But now wasn't the situation to fuss over such a trivial thing.

"If you can, then get ready to start it up. And get away as far as you can from here."

"Ragna, do you intend to remain alone!?"

The one who raised her voice was Celica, telling him not to say such a ridiculous thing. She ran and snatched Ragna's sleeve.

"Your opponent is the Black Beast, you know. I can't leave you here alone while you're facing it!"

"She's right. Besides, I want to fight, too. I can assist you from behind."

Nine displayed her objection within her aggressive stare. Following her, even Trinity leaned her body forward.

"Me, too. I'm ready to help you with protective magic. It is reckless to face it alone."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I'll be troubled if you stay here. I don't know what will happen once I collide with the Black Beast. Worst case scenario, you all might get dragged up."

In a different place, mist began to gushing out again. Two, three of other places followed suit.

Stepping back a bit, Ragna turned his face toward Nine as if telling her to hurry.

"Get on your feet! You all got mountain loads of things to do after this! If you get hurt, time will just get wasted! It'll get you in trouble!"

Nine's body stiffened. Ragna truly believed that he would create a gap of one year. No, he most likely would create it.

Nine had to use every bit of that time for the sake of suppressing the Black Beast.

Although her face looked frustrated, Nine bit her lips while she withdrew.

"Everyone, don't leave my side."

Annoyed and frustrated, Nine started focusing her consciousness. Not to strike Black Beast or its remnants, but to connect her consciousness to a place that wasn't here, crossing over airspace.

Nine's long hair fluttered. She started to be covered with a fascinating light.

Mitsuyoshi took a several large steps as if he was getting away from there.

"I'll stay."

"Hey! Bastard, did you listen to me!?"

Upset, Ragna yelled rudely at Mitsuyoshi who nimbly unsheathed his katana.

"My ears still work fine. But unlike the young lady, I can do nothin' but wield my sword. Although ye said the Black Beast's action would stop, I feel that it needs to happen as soon as possible."

Mitsuyoshi grinned. A smile was formed on the cat's mouth. His triangular ears were twitching.

"Though I might seem stubborn, I got confidence in myself. After all, ye won't reach its real body if yer careless. Just think of me as a firearm that's clearin' away the remnants in yer way."

Ragna clicked his tongue. But he was actually grateful for Mitsuyoshi's offer.

After he barely arrived in front of the real body, it was meaningless to crush the remnants that were around there.

There was nothing more reliable than having the competent Mitsuyoshi shaking off the remnants since he would just get overwhelmed.

"...Then, I'll be relying on you."

Behind Ragna and Mitsuyoshi, Nine's magic circle had its brilliance increasing.

"Then, we'll go on ahead. I'll leave this place to you two."

Nine spoke while she was on the center of the circle.

A faint sparkle was fired from Trinity's fingertip. It vanished after it wrapped Ragna and Mitsuyoshi.

"It's a protective magic that doesn't need to be controlled~. It should guard you against any physical impact."

"Thanks for the help."

Ragna raised the corner of his lips as he smiled. Trinity deeply bowed her head.

From beside her, Celica suddenly ran.

"Ragna!"

She rushed over and dived into his arms. Both of her hands were holding on Ragna's jacket tightly. Rather than clinging to him, it was more like she hugged him close.

"Wh... Idiot! Get back to the magic circle quickly!"

"You said you'll return. You'll really come back, right?"

Celica looked up at Ragna, demanding an explanation.

Looking down on her large eyes, Ragna felt an excessive strain come out from his body.

It felt nostalgic. Come to think of it, back when he met Celica for the first time, he felt familiar with the girl's gaze and her gentle expression.

Perhaps, it was possible that he had met her somewhere in the future period. If so, it was a wonder.

"Yeah. I promise."

Ragna smiled bitterly. He answered with a voice that had no hesitation in it.

It was a lie. He shouldn't be able to keep such promises. The opponent was the Black Beast. He mocked himself over the fact that he would definitely die. His cowardly self couldn't help but made its complaints be heard.

However, he didn't want to say the truth here.

It was fine, even if it was a lie. If he didn't promise to come back safely, he had a bad feeling that his feet would get dragged to something and he really would die.

Ragna took off the red jacket he had been wearing and gave it to Celica.

"Hold it for me. I'll return and pick it up."

Celica stared at Ragna for a while. Hugging the given jacket close to her, she then smiled as bright as the sun.

"...Okay, I understand. I'll trust you."

It was a lie. She shouldn't be able to believe him. She had a feeling that they wouldn't be able to meet again. That sad thought accumulated in her chest and made her suffocate.

But at the same time, she also felt that Ragna would return. Without any ground whatsoever, she truly believed it without a doubt. Celica supported herself with only that thought.

While holding Ragna's jacket in her arms, Celica slightly stood on her tiptoes.

Maybe it was the aftereffect of the fight between Nine and Mitsuyoshi as there was a small scratch on Ragna's cheek.

There, as if touching it gently, she gave it a kiss. The small wound recovered and vanished without a trace.

"You promised! I'll be waiting for Ragna to come back together with Mitsuyoshi-san!"

With her long hair and skirt lightly fluttered, Celica ran back to her sister's magic circle.

She furiously waved her hand to the dumbfounded Ragna.

Right after Celica's smile bloomed like a flower, the girls disappeared from that place.

As the flowers left, what had been delayed of its arrival was darkness.

The surroundings were bustling as a considerable number of holes where mist gushed out increased again and again.

Ragna and Mitsuyoshi dashed toward the middle of the hall with their respective weapon in hand.

Along the way, their pace was thrown out of order as there were some fragments of the mist. As if it was their everyday duty, they nonchalantly cleared them by decapitation, scattering them away.

After they had secured the space needed to fight, from the sky, a black lump descended with the force as if a giant sandbag had fell down.

If there were some names that could be used to address those noises, it would be nice.

It was too much of a darkness.

Countless extending, long necks which resembled serpents were rising slowly. The hall around the Cauldron that felt spacious was not enough as it ran out of space, covered by shadow. It was like the hall was engulfed. No, just by looking up at that irrationally gigantic body, it undoubtedly made them taste the sensation of being swallowed.

"Ha...haha. This guy's no joke."

Ragna laughed involuntarily. That voice sounded ridiculously feeble even to him.

From far away above his head, gigantic red eyes of the gigantic necks were looking down at their way, as if they were glaring.

Despair was leaning forward.

"...This is...the Black... Beast."

Scraping dusts, Mitsuyoshi's feet took a step back. He set up his katana and claws firmly. However, the tip of the sword was trembling as he was unable to conceal it.

"It's... it's impossible. This ain't something that can be easily handled by a man's hands."

Even if he made himself not think such a pathetic thought, his instinct screamed warnings.

No matter how he thought, it wasn't something someone could compete with.

His body stiffened, his feet paralyzed.

Before he knew it, he had withdrawn for quite a significant distance. Ragna's back appeared ahead of his line of sight.

With that kind of back, Ragna gave a glance as he looked over his shoulder.

"Get a hold of yourself. You're strong. So strong that someone like me is no match for you."

That belief didn't come from just one time when they crossed their swords. Mitsuyoshi probably would be Ragna's master in the period to come. His master was one of the Six Heroes that once had killed the Black Beast. He wouldn't be defeated here. He shouldn't be defeated.

Ragna fearlessly raised his lips.

"Something ridiculous beyond imagination has appeared... But it's too late to quit now. We got no choice but to do this, right?"

Bring it on, he thought. Probably the conquered fear had turned into thrilling motivation that ran down his spine.

Ragna tightly gripped his sword with both of his hands.

"Hey, Ragna."

Looking at Ragna who glanced back at the Black Beast again, Mitsuyoshi opened his mouth for a question.

"Couldn't you not move yer right arm?"

He was right. Indeed, just a while ago, only numbness could be felt on Ragna's right arm which was dangling heavily. But amazingly, now it moved. The discomforts he felt until now were like lies since it felt rather light.

"I don't really get it, but it somehow works."

It was also the same for the right eye that shouldn't be able to see. As the eyelid lifted up, his vision had regained back its original range for the first in a long time. It was now reflecting a terrifying mass of shadow.

Suddenly, it was twitching only for his right eye. His right arm throbbed at the same time.

It was only for a moment. There was no pain. Perhaps, it was rather close to a pleasuring shiver. As if something identical with their nature had melt together and made a connection.

(Aah, I get it... If so, then that might be the reason.)

As the reason had come down on him, Ragna grinned.

He remembered on why his right arm and right eye couldn't do anything.

———The Azure Grimoire.

He didn't know the exact concept of what kind of object that was, but it was probably something related to the Boundary, possibly the seithr.

However, their actions had been severely restrained because of something. Just like when the lynchpin was used according to Shuuichirou Ayatsuki's research.

It was probably because of Celica.

While the girl possessed a special healing power, at the same time, she also could hold back seithr's activity. Her restraining ability grew stronger as the seithr's scale grew larger. Because of Celica's influence, Ragna's right arm was temporarily suspended of any action.

"I thought it was because I've come to the past, but looks like that isn't the case. What the hell? Just tell me so if it's like that."

While muttering his complaint to himself, Ragna firmly gripped his right hand. The distinct sensation he hadn't felt for a while made a deep smile came upon him.

With this, he would be able to somehow manage even if the opponent was Black Beast.

Ragna once again raised his eyes on the dark mass in front of his eyes. The more one looked at it, the more outrageous it was.

The numerous necks could easily crush the likes of Ragna in one strike. They swayed as if putting themselves on guard.

"Until the end, I'm a human. I'll fight as a human being. What are you going to do?"

Ragna asked Mitsuyoshi. This time, Ragna didn't turn his head as his back faced Mitsuyoshi.

Mitsuyoshi took a deep breath and prepared his claws and katana once again.

"Just like ye said, we can't quit anymore..."

It wasn't to drive away his fear, but Mitsuyoshi was fully determined. Alone, Ragna was planning to attack the Black Beast's real body. Before him, Mitsuyoshi couldn't let himself alone to be seized with fear.

"Good. Then Mitsuyoshi, once I jumped on that guy, quickly retreat."

"Wh-!? Don't joke around, I...!"

He stayed in order to support Ragna. There was no way he could run away despite being told so.

But as if brushing away Mitsuyoshi's words, Ragna spoke.

"You still got a life to live."

That voice felt too heavy, and also sincere. Mitsuyoshi involuntarily swallowed his objection.

The truth was, Mitsuyoshi had a lot to say. Like, 'how could he run while the enemy was in front of him?'. Like, 'what are you going to do?'. ...Like, 'didn't you promise to come back to Celica?'.

But what made him unable to speak of them was because he completely understood that Ragna was personally prepared for it.

Instead, Mitsuyoshi went next to Ragna once more to stand beside him and asked something.

"Let me hear yer name."

"Huh? But I've given my name already."

"Ye got yer memory back, didn'tcha? What I want to know is yer true name."

Ragna wryly smiled. The name 'Ragna' Mitsuyoshi called him with wasn't a fake. On the other hand, Ragna didn't have a family name that indicated his origin.

That's why, this name should be the answer for his question.

"Bloodedge. It's Ragna the Bloodedge."

"...I'll remember it."

Nodding in his satisfaction, Mitsuyoshi displayed a smile in only an instant.

"Okay, let's go!"

"Leave the remnants to me."

As he heard Mitsuyoshi's reliable words, Ragna set his body low and broke into a run, dragging his sword.

In a straight line, he went toward the Black Beast.

The small black mists which had been blocking his way were scattered as the flying around gale from Mitsuyoshi sliced them off.

As expected of his arm. It would never yield.

"Restriction 666 released!"

As he recited the words that were engraved in his mind and body, the bandage, which was wrapped on Ragna's right arm, forcefully burst open. What appeared was not a human arm. It was as if it was created from hardened darkness. It was a black and sinister big arm.

Noticing it, Mitsuyoshi flinched for a moment with his movement stiffened as he found out about it.

Despite everything, he ran, preparing the jet black arm.

"Dimensional Interference Field deployed!"

As he said the words, countless red lines ran down Ragna's arm. He felt a great deal of power that could crush anything.

"*BlazBlue*, Activate!"

The round orb in the back of his arm flickered as if it was blinking. The *Azure* had awakened. Clad in the flickering Azure, his fingers' form were transformed.

What was before his eyes was a dreadful giant mass of darkness. Countless necks tried to seize Ragna all at once.

He spontaneously smiled.

"HERE WE GO, YOU GIGANTIC ASSHOLE!!"

After he roared, Ragna kicked the earth, cleared away the rising mist, and charged in toward the Black Beast.

Mitsuyoshi's shout that could be heard calling his name.

The somewhat cold Cauldron's heat that had become distant.

The bright red color of the flames.

Anything and everything was eroded by black shadow.

The Black Beast raised its countless crooked necks like a wave. And then, it swallowed Ragna altogether.

As night dawned, morning came.

With morning passed and became noon, it would be night again.

After night had ended for once more, the day would flow again and became night.

Celica quickly jumped on her feet at the modest sounds of door being knocked.

The person who knocked was Valkenhayn.

This place was the castle of the Alucard family which had Rachel Alucard as the new family head.

Celica was in the guest room.

After she heard the notice from Valkenhayn, Celica's expression bloomed, and then it got clouded as she ran on the hallway.

Running down the long stairs, she arrived on the first floor. She then ran with all her might from the entranceway to the parlor.

"Haah... haah... hah... Mitsuyoshi... san."

The notice Valkenhayn had reported to Celica was the return of Mitsuyoshi.

Sitting on the luxurious sofa in the parlor, Mitsuyoshi had wounds all over his body. Everywhere, dry blood stuck on his abundant fur and made it hard. Wounds covered all over him up to his long, flexible tails.

Falling behind Celica, Nine and Trinity finally arrived. Seeing Mitsuyoshi, both of them opened their eyes wide in surprise at his state.

He didn't appear to have the stamina to raise his body. Despite all that, with a firm expression, Mitsuyoshi turned to the direction opposite of him. Instead of lying down, he kept on sitting.

He seemed to be either exhausted, drowning in relief, or disciplining himself.

A large sword was held in his arm.

The so-called sword had a wide blade... the characteristic of Ragna's sword.

Celica hurriedly went to Mitsuyoshi's side and performed healing magic. However, the healed wounds were so small. Only grazes and cuts had received healing.

"...Sorry."

Suddenly, Mitsuyoshi talked.

A trembling, worn-out voice that could snap anytime. As if to get rid of it, Mitsuyoshi squeezed out his hoarse voice.

"Ragna charged at the Black Beast. Countless necks that were like snake's head bit 'im all at once... swallowed 'im. ...Black Beast's activity then came to a stop. After that, it disappeared, along with Ragna."

With pauses in-between, Mitsuyoshi spoke while he looked for words to use.

"What's left is this."

He clumsily moved his arm to give the sword he had been holding firmly to Celica.

Something black was sticking on the sword. It was unknown whether if it was the Black Beast's blood, Ragna's blood, or something entirely different.

"Sorry. ...I shouldn't have come back with just this."

"...It's okay."

Toward Mitsuyoshi's apology that seemed as thought splitting up his chest, Celica lightly shook her head.

"I'm happy that you came back. ...Thank you, Mitsuyoshi-san."

With a compassionate smile, Celica wiped Mitsuyoshi's wet eyes and hugged the sword she had received with care.

Epilogue

In that time, the Black Beast suddenly disappeared.

It lasted for approximately one year. During that interval, humanity rebuilt their ruined lives. At the same time, they established a numbers of techniques in their anticipation for another appearance of the Black Beast.

The greatest one among them was *Ars Magus*.

Vast kinds of sorcery was taught by the girl called Nine who belonged to the Magic Guild. Because of her efforts, Ars Magus, which was a sorcery that had been refined so that many people could use it, had become commonly used.

One year after the suspended activity of the Black Beast, it appeared in the world for the second time.

But thanks to the Ars Magus, humanity succeeded in repelling the Black Beast for the first time.

And then, 2110 AD.

By the hands of six warriors, the Black Beast was annihilated.

Several years had passed since the fall of the Black Beast.

Year by year, day by day, the world restored its form during the time of peace. From the withered plants, small buds grew. Little by little, rain filled the parched rivers.

The sky was blue while the sunshine was white. Wet from the morning drizzle, the trees in the forest were sparkling.

Not far off from the forest that had sunlight shining on it, there was a tiny church.

It stood alone at the end of a lenient path as if it reside there, hidden in obscurity. It looked like it came straight from a page of a fairy tale.

Behind that church, a girl was carrying a basket containing laundry.

She had brown hair, which was very similar to the color of wet ground, and eyes of the same color. A large portion of her hair was tied up. Looking at her simple black and white attire, it suggested that she worked at this church as a sister.

She was hanging a white sheet on the clothesline that had been set in the yard.

The clear sunny weather made her in a good mood. Naturally, the expression on her face was also bright.

"Celica—!"

Suddenly, she could hear a familiar voice coming from the path that was connected to the church.

Celica quickly arranged the sheet and rushed to the front of the church.

Waiting there were her older sister Nine, who was as beautiful as always, and her soon to be brother-in-law, the beastkin Mitsuyoshi.

"Look here. You knew that your sister was visiting, and yet you're still doing laundry?"

The garden... was what Celica called the opposite side of the front entrance as. Although it wasn't visible from the front entrance, Nine looked astonished when she took a quick peek there.

Beside her, Mitsuyoshi laughed merrily. There was an eye patch mimicking the guard of a katana covering his injured right eye.

"Looks like ye already gotten used to life in a church. At first, I was worried if ye were gonna to be fine in this remote place."

"Yup. Surprisingly, I can gather something like fruits and mushrooms when I enter the forest. And since it's a bother that there's nothing around here, I'm wondering if creating a farm would be a good idea."

The fact that it was located far away from the city and required a considerable amount of time to get to the nearest village, it didn't feel right to say that this place was ideal to construct a church.

However, this location was a special place.

A few years ago, six warriors, who were called as the *Six Heroes* as of now, defeated the Black Beast here.

And then at that location, Celica enlisted the help of her sister and Mitsuyoshi to build a small church.

"...Hey. Won't you get nothing from what you've been doing until now?"

While looking at the tranquil scenery that didn't seem likely for the ground where the Black Beast had fallen, Nine complained.

Incredibly, after the Black Beast had been exterminated, this land was gifted with greenery. According to the investigation of Nine and her close friend Trinity, it seemed to be caused by the effect from the high concentration of seithr that had formed the Black Beast.

Many people had refused to go near this eerie place. As a result, the surrounding forests were able to cover the land.

At her older sister's question, Celica shook her head with a smile.

"It's not because I feel obliged to do it. I'm doing it because I want to."

"But shouldn’t you try to have a more normal kind of happiness? Like working as a magician, or getting married."

"Nah. I've had a lot of thoughts about it."

A refreshing breeze was blowing. Celica looked at where the wind blew to. It was such a nice day.

"As I thought, I wish to wait. I've promised after all."

He would surely return.

Even if it took many years. Even if it took many decades.

"I want to meet Ragna once more."

And oddly enough, she had a hunch that they would meet again somewhere. Although it perhaps would only occur at an absurdly distant future.

When the time came, she would give back the large sword and red jacket she had washed clean. He had said that he would return to get it back after all.

"...Ain't it painful?"

Mitsuyoshi's voice that was as soft as a gentle breeze carried a tone of seriousness with it.

The questioning tone of voice was blurred with a sense of responsibility for failing to bring back the person Celica was waiting for. That was why to wipe it off, Celica gave a happy smile from the bottom of her heart.

"No, I'm really happy. Onee-chan and Mitsuyoshi-san... that's not it. You're now Jubei-san. It's because everyone defeated the Black Beast that I can leisurely do laundry like this while waiting for Ragna this long."

She had given such a response many times.

Her opinion didn't change in the least no matter how many times they asked. With her innocent smile, she always said that the waiting was her *happiness*. Toward the younger sister's personality, Nine and Mitsuyoshi could do nothing but look at each other while smiling bitterly.

"Well, that's fine. Today, we came to have a discussion."

Putting her hands on her hips, Nine shook her head in her astonishment and began to talk.

Celica's expression brightened up.

"Ah, that's right. So... what are we going to discuss?"

At her question, Nine smiled mischievously. At the same time, Mitsuyoshi seemed to be embarrassed while staring off at the distance.

"To tell you the truth, I want to hold our wedding here."

"EH!? H-Here!? Are you sure?"

With her eyes widened in surprise, Celica's cheeks became dyed with her excitement

Nine giggled.

"Of course. I mean, I request this to you."

"Ahaha, I see. Well then, we should immediately talk about the preparations."

"I leave myself in your care."

Looking at the excited figures of the sisters, Mitsuyoshi scratched the tip of his nose in embarrassment. His long tails swayed. According to Nine, it seemed his tails were his biggest charm point.

"Aah, that's right. Come inside. I'll brew some herb tea that Trinity-san had previously sent."

In a good mood, Celica opened the modest and firm door. She invited her sister that would be a married couple in the near future to her home.

If Ragna heard about this, what kind of surprised face would he make? Imagining it made her chest grow warmer and warmer.

The mild sunlight, lively conversation, and refreshing breeze.

In the midst of the gentle peace, Celica smiled.

———The darkness smirked.

A mouth shaped like a crescent moon was sneering.

"This farce is finally over... Now then, time to commence the despair!
HYAHAHAHAHA!"

Afterword

Thank you for getting your hands on the BlazBlue Phase 0 book. Hello, nice to meet you. My name is Komao Mako, the author.

Maybe a lot of people have already know this, but this is the novelization of BlazBlue, a competitive 2D fighting game (you can play the game on game centers; the software is also on sale for PS3 and Xbox 360!).

While BlazBlue is a fighting game, it also has the enjoyable rich story characteristic of an adventure game. This novel told the detail of a portion from BlazBlue's story that hadn't been revealed yet to everyone.

You can read the original story for the details...

This occasion is such an honor, because I could describe the characters and settings which I only aware the existences of until now into a novel!

In addition, I got a special treatment from Mori Toshimi-san, the BlazBlue producer who made the original draft for the story, to have him constantly supervise and check the settings and characters.

On top of that, he gave me a "Do your best!" cheer on a daily basis. As a writer, and being a fan of BlazBlue above all, this job couldn't get more enjoyable than this. Really, I was seriously indebted to him! I want to bow down my head as low as possible.

Not just Mori Toshimi-san, but also to Katou-san who gave me a smile while saying "It's okay," while I was really driven mad by the schedule. Moreover, he drew such cool illustrations that I couldn't believe my own eyes.

Also to everyone in charge of editing who gave me a call and said "I'm sorry," every time the schedule got changed, and for telling fun stories that always made me smile.

And to Mineshima-san from the PR for answering my questions since I still know little about BlazBlue, and for keeping up with my selfish demands every time I went to Arc System Works.

I'm really, reeeeeeeeally feel indebted to you guys!!

Thanks to all of you, I was able write with so much fun. Remembering it now, it felt like a dream (and the rackets around the deadline-related things really felt like a dream...)

If I can convey this excitement and enjoyment to everyone even for a little, I'll be even happier and happier!

Well then. Since the page has finally arrived at this point, let's close this talk with talking about BlazBlue next.

No. Everyone, have you played BlazBlue!?

Because I feel too much discomfort in using stick, I've been doing terribly at home.

Although I can use Jin without ease, Litchi's pole mechanic seems interesting. But it'll be stressful if I can't use her skillfully somehow. Also Carl! If I can use him properly, it feels like it'll be absolutely fun playing him... though I panicked when I do so. I will practice more.

As for character, my favorite is Hazama-san after all. Although the home version of the newly produced BlazBlue Continuum Shift has been on sale, I'm still not able to play it at the time of writing the afterword.

The TV at my house is too small. As a matter of fact, I can't read the letters on the story mode. Still, I want to use Hazama no matter what.

Once this novel is finished... I will practice so that I'm able to do Hazama's combos...

I'm brimming with such feeling.

Well then, when you start talking, it's unexpectedly hard to stop. I think this much should suffice as an afterword.

To all the staff, especially Mori Toshimi-san, and to anyone who got their hands on this book, I give my heartfelt thanks to you. Thank you so much!

Have a fun BlazBlue life!

~Komao Mako

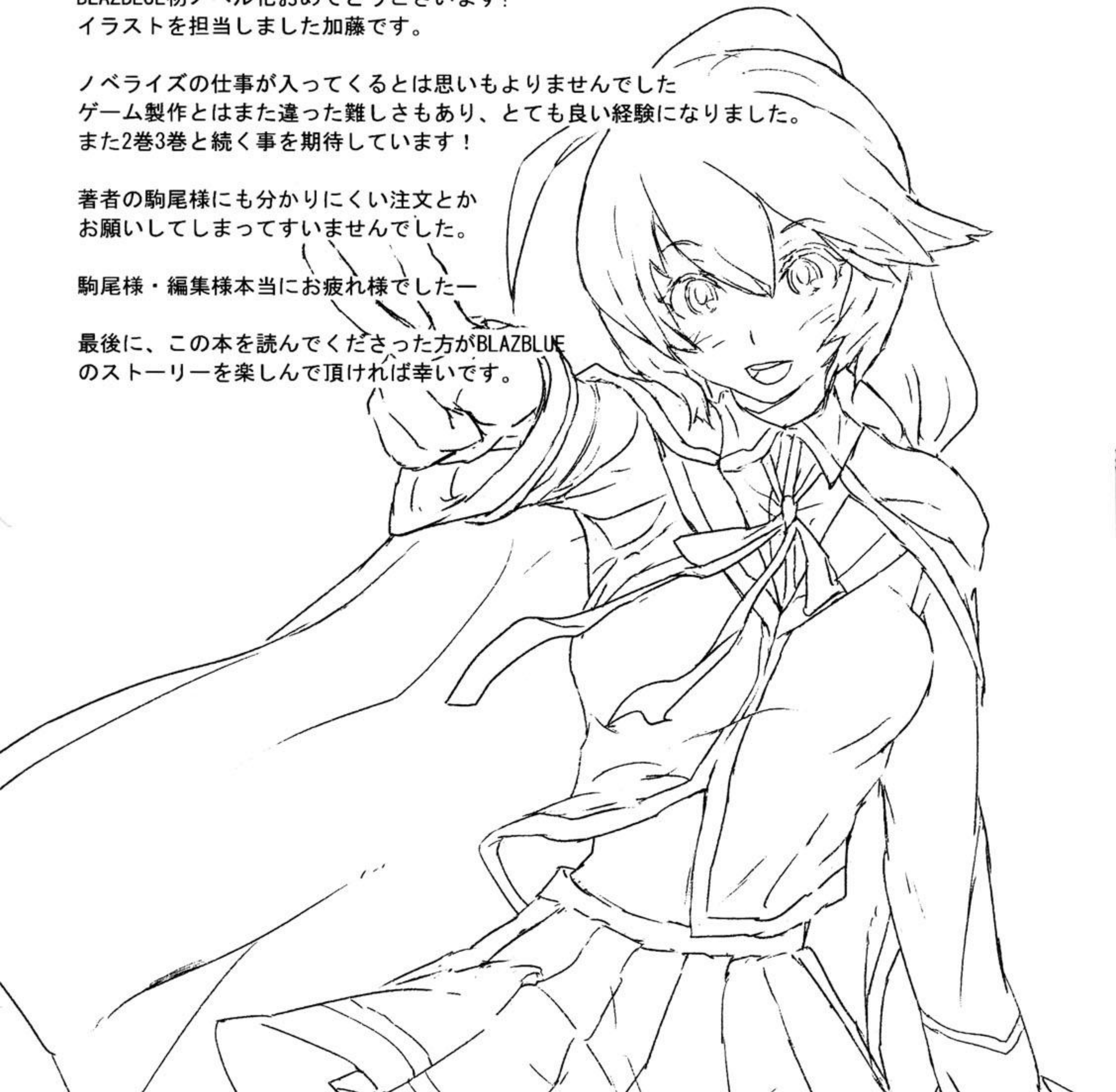
BLAZBLUE初ノベル化おめでとうございます!
イラストを担当しました加藤です。

ノベライズの仕事が入ってくるとは思いもよりませんでした
ゲーム製作とはまた違った難しさもあり、とても良い経験になりました。
また2巻3巻と続く事を期待しています！

著者の駒尾様にも分かりにくい注文とか
お願いしてしまってすいませんでした。

駒尾様・編集様本当にお疲れ様でしたー

最後に、この本を読んでくださった方がBLAZBLUE
のストーリーを楽しんで頂ければ幸いです。



Congratulations for the novelization of BlazBlue!

This is Katou who's in charge of illustration.

I never expected to get the novel job.

The difficulty was different compared to working on the game, so I got many good experiences.

I hope it will continue to volume 2 or even volume 8!

I wish to apologize if I asked such illegible request to the author Komao-sama.

Many thanks to Komao-sama and the editors.

Lastly, I would be happy if everyone read this book and enjoyed the BlazBlue story.

皆さんこんにちは、アークシステムワークスのモリトシミチです。
先ず、この本を手にとって頂きそしてここまで読んでくれた事を
感謝いたします。そしてこの作品は完全に「正伝」であり、
ブレイブルーの世界の一つで有ることを断言いたします。

富士見書房の担当様に熱く感謝すると共に、
俺のわがままや無茶を素晴らしい
形に仕上げてくれた駒尾さん、イラストを描いてくれた
加藤にも熱くお礼申し上げます。
皆さんの尽力のお陰でブレイブルーの世界が一つ広がりました。
この作品を切っ掛けに、ブレイブルーの世界が更に広がる事を
切に願います。

アークシステムワークス
森利道

なんかこっちもモテモテですみません…

2010 11/21
MORI

Hello everyone. This is Mori Toshimi from Arc System Works.

First, I thank you for picking up this book and have read it this far. And since this work is completely official, I declare that it's a part of the BlazBlue's world.

Together with my thanks for the staff in Fujimi Shobo, I give much gratitude to Komao-san for splendidly accomplishing my selfish and unreasonable requests. And also to Katou for drawing the illustrations.

Thanks to the efforts from everyone, the world of BlazBlue has expanded once more.

In the wake of this work, I sincerely hope that the world of BlazBlue will grow even more.

Arc System Works

~Mori Toshimi

He seems to be popular...

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain.
Baka-Tsuki does not and will not condone any activities of such, including but not limited to rent, sell, print, auction.

Credits

Story : Komao Mako
Illustrator : Yuuki Katou

Many thanks to Spesialo and Emma for translating and editing this novel!

PDF made by amc9988